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# An Architect of the New South: a Case Study of William Lawrence Hill and Sharon, South Carolina

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December, 2018

To the Dean of the Graduate School:

We are submitting a thesis written by Paul Laffredo III entitled “An Architect of the New South: A Case Study of William Lawrence Hill and Sharon, South Carolina.” This is an examination of a post Reconstruction merchant/planter and his role in building the community of Sharon, South Carolina.

We recommend acceptance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History.

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Dr. Edward Lee, Thesis Advisor

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AN ARCHITECT OF THE NEW SOUTH:  
A CASE STUDY OF WILLIAM LAWRENCE HILL  
AND SHARON, SOUTH CAROLINA.

A Thesis  
Presented to the Faculty  
Of the  
College of Arts and Science  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
Of  
Master of Arts in History  
At  
Winthrop University

December, 2018

By  
Paul Laffredo III

## **Thesis Abstract**

This is a case study of William Lawrence Hill and Sharon South Carolina. Mr. Hill was born in 1866 and grew up under the harshness of Reconstruction which taught Hill that above all else he did not want to become a southern farmer. At the age of ten, Hill was operating a mercantile, for the benefit of the Blairsville, South Carolina community. In 1898, Hill relocated about twenty miles away to the community called Sharon. Hill along with four other men incorporated the Sharon community into a town and served as a member of its first city council. Upon moving to Sharon, Hill partnered with the Kennedy family to operate the mercantile that was located there. The partnership with the Kennedys lasted less than two years and when it dissolved Hill was the only merchant left in business in Sharon. Hill started Planters Bank; housed within the mercantile store he named Hill mercantile and through this avenue he was able to acquire money from the War Finance Department, which was then used to expand local farms, in order to provide for the increased demands of World War I. Throughout his life Hill became the cornerstone of Sharon's prosperity, through his many successful business ventures that lasted long after his death. By reviewing both bank and mercantile records we get a detailed view of this community through some of its worst economic times, in peace and war. Although the bank closed during or right before the stock market collapse of 1929 bank records and mercantile records show us a unique glimpse of the economic times during world war one and the depression. These records also show that many of the farmers who did take advantage of this government money were no longer in possession of these farms because of the hard economic times caused by an abundance of cotton on the market, war surplus, as well as the boll weevil infestation that hit this area in 1918.

Mercantile records show the futility of cotton farming as farmers fell into debt to the tune of hundreds of dollars, year after year, which equates to tens of thousands of dollars today. Throughout his life time, Hill owned and operated, in addition to the mercantile and bank, a car dealership, a cotton gin, grist mill, service station, several cotton warehouses and had approximately 1200 acres of his own under the plow, which he operated through the tenant farmer method. These same cotton farming records show how Hill created and helped run and maintain the first cotton cooperative in the state of South Carolina and that by doing this all the local farmers were able to receive a fairer wage for their crop.

The business records of Hill Motor works show that one part of the South's problem was infrastructure or lack of one, as Mr. Hill is often quoted in local newspapers as being an advocate of the Good Roads Movement. Infrastructure was a key condition for the growth of Sharon and through bank records dealing with municipal bonds we can

see just how important infrastructure was. Business records will show that Hill was only able to have electricity brought to Sharon after and only after there was a paved road. Correspondence between Hill and Duke Power show that once the road was paved electricity soon followed. These same banking records will show the building of the Buster Boyd Bridge as well as other internal structure improvements in the surrounding communities.

Banking records will also show that Hill, through his handling of municipal bonds the community of Bullocks Creek and many others expanded rapidly. Hill also was dedicated to the economic expansion of his community and approached companies such as Pet Dairies and Craft Cheese to build a plant in or around the Sharon community. In his efforts to expand the economic base of Sharon, Hill attempted or encouraged the raising of specific goats and sheep in order to offer raw materials to the cheese industry as well as wool for the expansion of the textile industry in the greater Sharon community.

In addition, mercantile records as well as newspaper articles will attest to Hill's ability to think locally but maintain a global perspective. By the use of his current technology Hill bought products for his mercantile, the local farmers, as well as his own farms from as far away as Canada, managing to have entire rail cars of merchandise on the siding by his store in three to five days. In addition the newspaper articles from the Yorkville Inquirer, earlier mentioned will show that the millinery, located on the second floor of the mercantile, had gained an international reputation as the ladies hat made there were envied on the streets of Paris.

By examining the business records of Hill, we begin to understand, on a local level, the financial hardships faced by the residents as well as answer some large themed historical events like how did the depression affect the Sharon community and York County. Hills business records suggest that the South's love of cotton was directly related to infrastructure problems as well as show how government programs like the War Finance Act, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the Works Project Administration helped but also doomed local farmers to either success or failure. In addition this collection will show that for the citizens of Sharon the twenties were not so roaring.

Through oral interviews of past employees, we confirm census data which list Hill as being biracial and through these census records we also confirm newspaper articles that state Hill had only received a fifth grade education and yet Hill donated the land for a new high school as well as making sure all his children were college educated, showing the importance Hill placed on education in general.

William L. Hill lived through the most formidable and trying times our country has faced and by the magnitude of both personal and business records that have remained we can, through detailed examination, get a very accurate picture of what life was like, on an individual basis rather than a broad perspective during those trying times.

## **Acknowledgements**

Dr. Edward Lee, Professor of History and my Thesis Advisor at Winthrop University, for constantly reminding me to have fun with it.

Dr. Gregory Bell, Assistant Professor of History and a member of my thesis committee at Winthrop University, for showing me how to see the bigger picture contained within small documents.

To the residents of Sharon who so eagerly spoke to me every time I visited.

Mr. Hershel Brown, a local resident of Sharon and past employee of William L. Hill, a special thank you to Brownie for almost bringing to life a man and an era long forgotten by many.

Lastly, a special thanks to my wife, Vickie, for her never ending patience and support.

## Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	v
New Beginnings	1
The Mercantile	17
The Bank	39
Building the Town	65
Cotton and other Endeavors	84
The Man Himself	95
The Legacy	112
Appendices	119
Bibliography	122
 William Lawrence Hill, Sr	 2
Hill & Co. mercantile	31
Grand staircase	32
Dumb waiter	37
Planters Bank sample documents	39
Planters Bank cashier's cage	43
A rendition of Mr. Hill's vision for Sharon's future	66
Hill & Co. cotton gin	88
William Lawrence Hill, Sr family tree	116



Appendix A: First page of 1921 State Bank Examiner's Report	119
Appendix B: Second page of 1921 State Bank Examiner's Report	120
Appendix C: Planters Bank document dated 18 April 1940	121

## **New Beginnings**

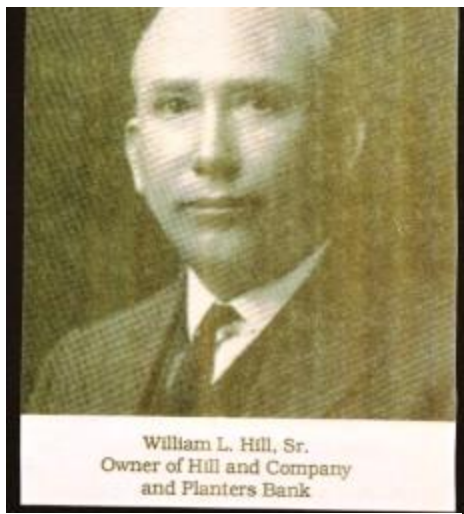
When this journey started, the sole intention was to earn a Master's Degree in History. As a graduate student an internship is a requirement. The York County Historical Center in York, South Carolina, also known as the McCelvey Center, just happened to have an extensive collection that needed to be archived. The collection to be archived belonged to a man named William Lawrence Hill who was born 18 January 1866 and died on 6 October 1953.<sup>1</sup> The initial and only interest or interaction with Mr. Hill was to organize the multitude of business and personal papers left behind. Some of Mr. Hill's papers are nearly a hundred years old, while others are rare examples of cloth stationary, and all of which needed to be organized into a coherent collection. It was almost three months into this process of organizing papers when Mr. Hill began talking, at which time I began asking questions. Questions such as, what does the War Finance Department have to do with not just rural southern farming in general, but with York County specifically, in 1918? This was only the beginning of many hours spent conversing with Mr. Hill. Although it was a one-sided conversation, it was never dull as intrigue into this man grew day by day. Going one step further, conversations with the current residents of Sharon, South Carolina did little to satisfy the curiosity. Through these conversations it was suggested that there may be a few skeletons hiding in Mr. Hill's closets, and one just has to dig deep enough to uncover them. In just a fraction of a second my entire thought process changed as though Mr. Hill was there before me whispering "There you go son, I'm your thesis." "My life is a tale worth the telling,

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<sup>1</sup> "W. L. Hill, 87, Sharon Farmer, Merchant, Dies," *Evening Herald*, 7 October 1953, York County Library.

don't you think?" So, the hunt began, digging through libraries, newspapers, the South Carolina State Archives, and court records, I searched so much that my wife joined in with her own internet searches. Playing detective can turn one into a super sleuth. During this detective process, the finding and uncovering of many truths about Mr. Hill, his successes, his failures, his hopes, and his ambitions were revealed. Even the answers and the truths behind the skeletons in his closets he once hoped to be kept hidden from the world, are now revealed for all read.

William Lawrence Hill was born to Nathaniel Hill and Jane Minter Hill on 18 January 1866, which was Nathaniel's second marriage. Prior to Jane, Nathaniel Hill was



William Lawrence Hill, Sr

married to a Sarah Morgan and that marriage produced a daughter Margaret, as well as two sons, Samuel Sylvanus and Joseph Calhoun.<sup>2</sup> The reason behind the death of Nathaniel's first wife, Sarah and the fate of the children produced by that marriage was never pursued because they are not part of Hill's direct lineage and thus have little bearing on his story. Nathaniel married Jane in

June of 1860.<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Hill and Jane Minter had a son in 1862, and they named him Beauregard, possibly in honor of the great Confederate General P. G. T. Beauregard, who had been present at the opening salvos of the Civil War, and witnessed the bombardment

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Hart Collection, York County Cultural and Heritage Museum, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>3</sup> Brent Holcomb, Ed. *York, South Carolina, Newspapers Marriage and Death Notices, 1823-1865* (Spartanburg: The Reprint Company, Publishers, 2010), 43.

of Fort Sumter. Unfortunately Nathaniel did not live long enough to see Beauregard defend either Charleston or Richmond as he was killed in combat on 5 May 1862 at the battle of Williamsburg, Virginia. Nathaniel was just one of almost 1700 Confederates killed that day and buried in one of several mass graves.<sup>4</sup> These same records show that Nathaniel Hill served as a Private in Company E, 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment, South Carolina Volunteers, also known as the Turkey Creek Grays. It was at the moment of Nathaniel Hill's death in May of 1862 when fate altered William Lawrence Hill's life. Did Nathaniel wake that morning with a sense of dread or foreboding, as if sensing this was his last day on earth? We will never know what Nathaniel Hill felt on his last day but along with his death came the birth of William Lawrence Hill's very first skeleton in the closet. Mr. Hill, at this point in history isn't even born and won't be for almost four years after the recorded death of his father. Nathaniel Hill's father, also named Nathaniel, was born in 1792 in York County and listed as a farmer in the U.S. census records. According to the 1840 census records Nathaniel Hill's father, William Lawrence Hill's grandfather of record, owned slaves.<sup>5</sup> There is a Col. William Hill, hero of the Battle of Kings Mountain<sup>6</sup>, who died in 1816 and who may have been York County's largest slave owner with 66 slaves. Although no document linking these two William Hills has been located, genealogically, at least in York County, families with identical surnames are generally

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<sup>4</sup> Confederate Record For Nathaniel Hill, Confederate War Records, York County Cultural and Heritage Museum, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>5</sup> "United States Census, 1840," p. 268, NARA microfilm publication M704, (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.) roll 516; FHL microfilm 22,511, FamilySearch, Accessed 8 September 2017, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XHT8-9HF>.

<sup>6</sup> Grave marker, Kings Mountain National Park, Kings Mountain, North Carolina.

related through blood or marriage and it would be of little surprise if a document someday surfaces making that very connection.

With an obvious dead end as far as the paternal side of Hill's family goes, we turn to the maternal side in an effort to try to begin to understand or learn a bit of background concerning Mr. Hill. By better understanding his background we are better able to understand the how's and why's of his life as contained in the vast number of documents that remain. Jane Hill, William Lawrence Hill's mother, was a Minter. The Minters in York County can be traced back to Jane's great-grandfather, William Minter, who settled his wife and children in the Bullocks Creek area before 1769. The Minter family grew and spread throughout York & Chester Counties inter-marrying with many of the area family names like Love, Sherer, Gwin, and even into my in-law's, the Hardin family. However, one Minter's life struck a familiar chord, that of William Adolphus Minter, born in 1830 and died in 1908.<sup>7</sup> This William was a cousin to Hill's mother, Jane. William A. Minter was a merchant/planter as well, with the emphasis on merchant and most likely not much more than a subsistence farmer. U.S. census records show him hopscotching in a southwesterly route across the South following the railroad with brief stops along the way in Mississippi and Buffalo Gap, Texas. William A Minter finally settles in Abilene where he established Minter's Dry Goods.<sup>8</sup> The railroad was becoming the main mode of land transportation for people, goods, raw materials, and agricultural

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<sup>7</sup> "Memorial page for William Adolphus Minter, Sr (30 Sep 1830–23 Dec 1908), Find A Grave Memorial no. 21755155, citing Abilene Municipal Cemetery, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas, USA," Find A Grave, Accessed 02 October 2017, <https://www.findagrave.com>.

<sup>8</sup> "National Register of Historic Places Registration Form," Texas Historic Sites Atlas, Accessed 27 March 2018, <https://atlas.thc.state.tx.us/NR/pdfs/92000198/92000198.pdf>.

products. The railroad would retain this status until the Good Roads movement of the early 1890's and the Eisenhower Interstate System of the 1950's elevated the automobile to a status far superior to the train. In fact, the railroad, or rather its location, would be one of the deciding factors for Hill when he moved to Sharon.

The Joseph Hart collection suggests that the Minters may have been merchant/farmers since colonial times. Twice benefitting from land grants associated with their family's involvement in both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, the Minters may have been a family of some means. It was one of these land grants that brought the Minters and Jane to York County. Although this research never produced any documents that would suggest the Minters ever owned slaves there are numerous African American families in the Sharon, Bullocks Creek and Chester areas of South Carolina bearing the Minter surname. This potential source of capital may have enabled them to move across this country, as farmland played out or better mercantile opportunities became available. As America and Americans expanded the frontier, driving deeper into the interior of this vast continent, merchants and farmers would be needed and numerous opportunities would be found along the way.

In a twist of irony, Minter's Dry Goods store was still in operation until October of 1974 when the family sold the business. As Mr. Hill was busy building South Carolina's, as well as Sharon's, first modern department store, his cousin, William A. Minter Jr., was busy in Abilene, Texas doing the same thing.<sup>9</sup> Of even greater irony, both dry goods stores lasted into the early 1970's. While still living in the Blairsville

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<sup>9</sup> "Minter Dry Goods Company (Abilene, Texas): An Inventory of Its Records, 1900-1973," Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, Accessed 26 March 2018, <https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/taro/ttusw/00194/00194-P.html>.

area, William A. Minter also ran a mercantile. However, Hill would have only been one to three years old when William A. Minter left this area, since census records show him gone by 1867. An original assumption was that William Adolphus Minter introduced Hill to the mercantile trade, but since the dates don't work, all that is left now is that retail merchandising may have been in his blood, so to speak. Another cousin to Hill was also operating a dry goods store in Chester, South Carolina called Gwin & Minter Dry Goods, as listed in the 1908 Chester city directory, confirming the Minters as a family of merchants.<sup>10</sup> This gives more credence to Hill's title of "Dean of Merchants," as he was referred to in local newspaper articles.<sup>11</sup>

Jane Minter Hill was born in 1827 and for the first thirty-five years of her life, slavery and the slave economy were very prominent influences. Reconstruction and an ever changing society would also affect her as a widow and single mother trying to raise her children. Slavery in great numbers is generally associated with the Low Country in South Carolina; however, according to historian Lacy K. Ford, at the University of South Carolina, the number of slaves in the Upcountry or Backcountry of South Carolina may have been quite significant. In 1793, South Carolina produced only 94,000 lbs. of cotton; however, by 1811 the Backcountry of South Carolina was harvesting over 30 million lbs.<sup>12</sup> King Cotton was changing the entire state of South Carolina, by 1820 forty percent

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<sup>10</sup> *Chester, South Carolina City Directory, 1908, vol. I* (Asheville: Piedmont Directory Co. Inc., 1908), 103, South Carolina Digital Library.

<sup>11</sup> "W. L. Hill, 87, Sharon Farmer, Merchant, Dies," *Evening Herald*, 7 October 1953, York County Library.

<sup>12</sup> Lacy K. Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 12.

of backcountry families now owned slaves.<sup>13</sup> The introduction of slaves into the backcountry began to balance the racial population of York County into a sixty-forty balance. Less than three percent of York County farms were more than five hundred acres in size with most being around one hundred acres or less, with most averaging ten slaves per household.<sup>14</sup> On the eve of the Civil War, just five years before Hill's birth, York County's population had grown to nearly 21,500, almost half being enslaved labor.<sup>15</sup> The slave mentality, the slave economy, and the Slaveocracy was a very real part of Hill's mother Jane, and his step-sister, Margaret's life as would be Reconstruction, all of which had a bearing and left lasting imprints on William Hill.

Reconstruction in York County is something that Hill would have vivid memories of since he would have been about ten when it ended in 1877. It is also a very good possibility that he remembered this period, because for York County, it was both bloody and violent. The violence that took place was racial in nature and carried out by the Ku Klux Klan. The purpose of the violence was to control the black man, but more specifically it was about controlling how the black man voted. Although not a direct desire of the Klan, this violence had ripple effects, one being a seriously depressed economy. Historian Jerry West paints a rather vivid picture of this depressed economy and how it affected York County writing, "the atmosphere of violence during 1870 and into 1871 crippled the financial life of York County."<sup>16</sup> The local paper, the Yorkville

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<sup>13</sup> Ford, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Ford, 49.

<sup>15</sup> *York County, South Carolina, Population Schedules of the Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*, Roll 1228 (Washington, DC: National Archives Publications).

<sup>16</sup> Jerry Lee West, *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County, South Carolina, 1865-1877* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 77.



Enquirer, was also quick to put into print what they termed difficulties, “the prosperity of the county is injured by the late difficulties.”<sup>17</sup> It appears that at least one of these difficulties was, “a severe labor shortage.”<sup>18</sup> The reason for such a labor shortage appears that a lot of people were leaving York County, “the whites to avoid arrest and the blacks to avoid attack.”<sup>19</sup> Things were apparently so severe in York County that the military had to be called in and this was also announced by the Yorkville Enquirer as headlines read, “Grant Declares Martial Law.”<sup>20</sup> Not only did President Ulysses S. Grant declare martial law in York County, he declared it in a total of nine upstate counties of South Carolina. Along with martial law, he sent troops in to carry out the order, “under Federal orders Col. Lewis Merrill arrived in Columbia with three companies of the Seventh Calvary.”<sup>21</sup> And for York County, “Captain John Christopher, Commander of a company of United States troops, arrived in late February.”<sup>22</sup> This must have been a very confusing time to grow up in as the lines between who is a friend and who is an enemy becomes blurred, such as in a case which appeared in the November 2, 1871 edition of the Yorkville Enquirer. In this particular instance 21 men were arrested for suspected Klan activities, and the last four names listed were black men.<sup>23</sup> Although Col. Merrill’s men arrested four blacks only two were actually held over for trial. Blacks as members of the Ku Klux

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<sup>17</sup> West, 77.

<sup>18</sup> West, 77.

<sup>19</sup> West, 77.

<sup>20</sup> “Affairs In York,” *Yorkville Enquirer*, 19 October 1871, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress, <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1871-10-19/ed-1/seq-2/>>.

<sup>21</sup> West, 79.

<sup>22</sup> West, 80.

<sup>23</sup> “The Situation,” *Yorkville Enquirer*, 2 November 1871, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress, <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1871-11-02/ed-1/seq-2/>>.

Klan: one wonders, why would they choose to associate with white supremacists? The newspaper article broaches the same question and the response was that the black men in question were still loyal to their old masters, perhaps a precursor of modern Stockholm syndrome. The reality of the situation is more likely that by joining the Klan these black men and their families were offered at least a small amount of safety and protection as long as they continued to obey.

Another interesting and potentially major source of embarrassment discovered early on concerns Hill's racial makeup. As historians we are obligated to reveal the facts as they are uncovered; never do we intend to offend or insult anyone. Once the facts are revealed it is left up to each individual to decide what the truth is; after all, there are many versions of truth in recorded history. As mentioned, some data comes from government census records which included several columns for different types of data to be collected; one such column was for recording the race of individuals residing within the household. Along with race, other information recorded included name, gender, age, relationship to the head of the house, education, and occupation of all the occupants within the home. On the 1900 census for Jane Minter Hill there appears for the first time a woman going by the name of Orrie Hill, with a birth date of 15 January 1869 and listed as the younger sister of Hill. Another inconsistency discovered is that, over the course of forty years, Orrie Hill and William L. Hill were listed or rather classified as white, mulatto, or black, beginning with the 1880 census and ending with the 1920 census.<sup>24</sup> All other occupants of the home, including Jane, were always listed as white. Unfortunately,

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<sup>24</sup> "United States Census, 1900-1920 South Carolina, York County." Family Search, [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

the entire South Carolina 1890 census was destroyed in a fire. It is possible that those records could have clarified the questions of the mysterious sister, Orrie, or the racial makeup of this family. Having had the pleasure of interviewing two of Hill's past employees, the question of Hill's racial make-up was put forth. One of those employees, Hershel Brown offered an answer that might be a typical response, "it wouldn't surprise me, you know that kind of thing did happen around here."<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, the other past employee was a lady who wished to remain anonymous, and when asked about the possibility of bi-racialism in the Hill family abruptly ended the interview. Her response was, "nope, you will never get me to believe that and I don't think I can be of any help to you."<sup>26</sup> At this point, what had been a friendly conversation regarding the past ended immediately and the exit politely shown. Hindsight usually bears out that anything which is denied that strongly usually has some truth behind it. It is possible that additional documents may someday surface shedding additional light on the Hills' racial content; however, every individual chooses what to believe. Hill eventually grew up, got married, raised five children, three grandchildren and at least four great-grandchildren that can be confirmed through multiple vital records as well as property records. In this process he amassed a personal fortune, and left his heirs an estate still valued at 1.5 million dollars. How did he do it?

Hill grew up in the community of Blairsville, South Carolina. Once located near the intersection of current day South Carolina highways 322 and 97, slightly south of

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<sup>25</sup> Herschel Brown, Sr. (former Hill & Co. employee), interviewed by Paul Laffredo III, Sharon, South Carolina, April 22, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Anonymous former Hill & Co. employee, interviewed by Paul Laffredo III, Sharon, South Carolina, 29 April 2017.

Sharon, South Carolina. If you look at a map today you will not find it because it no longer exists. All that remains now are rolling pastures dotted with a few residential dwellings. Otherwise, the area is still pretty much the same as it was during Hill's childhood. The one thing discovered during this process runs somewhat contrary to assumptions about the South, whether Antebellum, Civil War, or Reconstruction – change does come to the South, it may be slow and not always deliberate or welcome, but it does eventually come.

As a young man growing up in York County, Hill would have experienced very unsettling and trying times for a boy and eventually a young man. His first ten years or so would have been during the era of Reconstruction and the swarm of carpet baggers that came south, all with schemes of getting rich at the expense of an already economically devastated South. Then, adding to all of this, there is the possibility that Hill may be biracial, making his story all the more fascinating. There are many excellent books written concerning this period; a quick search attests to the number of books concerning the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the era in general; the problem becomes showing what life was like on a small scale. In narrowing the focus, "*The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County, South Carolina, 1865–1877*" by Jerry L. West proved especially helpful.

In his book, West places York County under a magnifying glass and show us almost exactly what daily life was like, as Hill was growing up. West credits the use of some of the same resources and sources used in researching Hill's life. West credits the York County Library in Rock Hill as his "go to" place for articles that appeared in the

*Yorkville Enquirer* as well as the York County Historical Society as rich sources of documents: and on this it is agreed. By describing life in York County we can begin to see that for Hill, at least on the visual level, life was difficult. This was a time of the vanquished; when those that were once the upper-class ruling body felt betrayed. This was a time when fear still ruled men: the fear of an oppressive government out for revenge, the fear of a state government that once called them to arms to defend themselves and their neighbors from the very government they were now being forced to swear allegiance to. Then there was the fear of an unknown future now populated by over a million individuals once held in bondage, now free to seek their pound of flesh on those once called master. For the young Mr. Hill it was a time of violence as those that were currently in control tried to control the black man and his newly won right to vote. At first, those efforts were peaceful, but as the black community became more conscious of the power contained within the ballot box and that by sticking together they might actually be capable of causing change, and as more black men began being elected to public offices, things became more violent. Again, there are many good sources chronicling this violence, from the mundane physical attacks all the way to actual lynching and hangings.

Hill not only grew up on farms but most likely was born on the farm. Having been born into that lifestyle, by the earliest of age possible the young Mr. Hill performed chores and manual labor. At first it was probably just following his mother around helping in whatever way possible; before, eventually leading to things like fetching water, chopping or bringing in firewood for both cooking and heating as well as feeding

some of the livestock. When Hill was ten years old, besides his mother, he shared this residence with his brothers, Beauregard and Calhoun. Another brother, Sylvanus, who was around 21 years old, by 1880 was a married farmer living at Bullocks Creek.<sup>27</sup> The 1880 census shows Jane, her children, Calhoun and Beauregard, along with her mother, Lavinia Minter, her sister Easter and Easter's daughter, Alice living at their home.<sup>28</sup> By this time, Hill no longer lived with his family and would never return.

Hill started his own mercantile at the tender age of ten years old. This sounds like something that is just too hard to believe. When taking into account; however, the possibility that Hill was biracial, as well as living in the most racially violent county in the state of South Carolina, this does seem to be a tall tale. Personal information regarding Hill is scarce and those documents that are included in this collection are hard to confirm with other sources. One such document that could be confirmed is dated June 25, 1923. This document was written by Hill to a Mr. R. F. Bryan at the *Rock Hill Herald*, and refers to an upcoming article which was to appear in *The Evening Herald*.<sup>29</sup> The article was to contain an ad for Planters Bank as well as a short piece on the Bank, the town of Sharon, and the community. Of particular interest in this document is where it says, "additions and erasures on life and business of Mr. Hill."<sup>30</sup> Tracking down this

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<sup>27</sup> "United States Census, 1880," enumeration district ED 164, sheet 399B, NARA microfilm publication T9 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.) roll 1243; FHL microfilm 1,255,243, Family Search, Accessed 15 July 2017, <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/M63S-F5B>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph E. Hart Collection, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

article it was discovered that in Hill's own words he started his mercantile, "as a boy."<sup>31</sup>

Not only did this research lead to personal information on Hill it also led to two past employees which I had the pleasure of interviewing. There is also a private collection of Hill family papers that was examined. Although this private collection deals with the descendants of Nathaniel Hill and his first wife Sarah, they contained handwritten letters among Hill family members. Contained within these letters is a conversation that refers to the young Mr. Hill and his mercantile enterprise as well as the fact that he was ten years old.

The hows and whys of this can be justified in numerous ways. The simplest explanation is that one day Hill's mother needed something from the store and he was sent. Blairsville, where Hill lived, was approximately ten miles from Yorkville, as York was then called. It is not known if Hill had a mule, or a horse or even a donkey to make this journey or if he walked the entire route. It is also very possible that the young Hill knew paths through the woods and fields that would make this an even shorter trip. Having traversed this path and returned home successfully from this first trip, his mother would from then on become more comfortable sending him on this journey. At this point, Hill may have offered to pick up a few things or possibly he was asked to pick up a few things by neighbors or family members that lived close by. Depending on the circumstances, Hill may have had an arrangement with the Yorkville store for buying in bulk and with his Blairsville customers, over time this could have blossomed into a small mercantile store of sorts. Granted these arrangements dealt with a very small and specific

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<sup>31</sup> R. F. Bryan, "Leading Citizen of Sharon Has Been Factor In Development of Western Portion of County." *Evening Herald*, 30 June 1923, Rock Hill and York County National Publicity Edition, York County Library, Rock Hill, South Carolina.

community but it was apparently large enough that it convinced Hill that he would rather be a merchant than a farmer.

Another document that supports Hill not wanting to be a farmer is the 1880 U. S. Census, which lists Hill as a domestic employee, not living at home.<sup>32</sup> According to the census he is living at Bullocks Creek with the Kersey family. This census also lists the head of the Kersey family, John, as a farm laborer. Hill is 13 or 14 years old at this point and had he wanted to be a farmer he could have accomplished this by staying at home with his family or hired himself out as a farm laborer. There may be a connection between a John Kersey and Nathaniel Hill as both men served in the South Carolina 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment<sup>33</sup> and may explain why Hill was working on this farm and not his mother's: but, this is only speculation as this connection is nothing more than a side note. In the oral interviews, it was learned that Hill's children were often ridiculed because they didn't know who their grandfather was, or where he was buried. It is possible that Hill was also teased or even ostracized over the same. This teasing may or may not have been carried out by the children from Nathaniel Hill's first marriage as well as being compounded by the potential race issue. There is only evidence of Hill's children being teased, but if he also received this type of treatment as well, it may go a long way in explaining why he distanced himself from his family at such a young age. This may also explain why there are few documents suggesting Hill remained in close contact with his other siblings.

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<sup>32</sup> "United States Census, 1880," enumeration district ED 164, sheet 387B, NARA microfilm publication T9 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), roll 1243; FHL microfilm 1,255,243, Family Search, Accessed 15 July 2017, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M63S-52Z>.

<sup>33</sup> South Carolina 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment Roster, Confederate War Records, York County Cultural and Heritage Museum, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.



In the oral interview with Hershel Brown, Mr. Brown confessed that it was because of Hill's influence on his life as a young man that he, himself, became a successful merchant.<sup>34</sup> In 1890, as the legend is told, Hill along with a wagon load of old junk and a half dead horse arrive in Sharon and set up shop. As the documents suggest it was a little more than just setting up shop. In fact, Hill would have many ups and downs as he builds his financial empire. Along the way he at times acted as though he was the 'Dean' of Sharon and the surrounding community as he appears too single-handedly usher in both paved roads and electricity. Through bank and mercantile documentation we can see how he dealt with, in sometimes a very harsh or stern manner, various farmers, tenant farmers, and share croppers. Using bank and mercantile documents as well as personal correspondence with various state agencies Hill was always looking to the future in an effort to expand the economic base of not only himself but also the town of Sharon and those that called this tight-knit community home.

Hill started his mercantile, Hill & Co., in 1890, in Sharon, South Carolina, in much the same manner as the large department stores of today did (e.g., Belk, J. C. Penney, and Sears & Roebuck.) However, because Hill, through the mercantile and Planters Bank, remained deeply embedded in all aspects of the cotton trade, including the buying, selling and expanding of existing farms as well as attempting to finance many local municipal bonds, he was able to provide a comfortable life for his family but was never able to rise above a local country merchant.

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<sup>34</sup> Herschel Brown, Sr. (former Hill & Co. employee), interviewed by Paul Laffredo III, Sharon, South Carolina, 22 April 2017.

## **The Mercantile**

As the story is told by the residents of Sharon, Hill along with a half dead horse and a wagon load of old junk arrived in October of 1889. Hill was 26 years old at the time and had come to what would be the first of the many crossroads he would encounter in his life. Realizing the Blairsville community, as well as his small mercantile enterprise, would not provide him the resources that would be necessary to see his dreams and ambitions come to fruition, Hill had to make possibly the biggest and most important decision of his life. Having outgrown Blairsville, Hill had his pick of numerous larger local communities within York County or neighboring counties. He could move east to Rock Hill, south to Chester, or farther north to Clover and Yorkville, as it was called in his day.

The location Hill chose was an area that would very soon become the community of Sharon. Hill may have chosen this site because of its upcoming status. A Mr. W. L. Plexico in November of 1888 decided to relocate his sawmill to this area and there were several lots already sold for both residential and commercial purposes.<sup>35</sup> While he was attempting to make a decision and as various residents left the Blairsville community, the Three C's Railroad was busy laying a side track to Sharon.<sup>36</sup> It must have been an opportunity that was just too good to pass up because this is where Hill headed. Sharon, at this time, was not more than a few buildings and a lot of hope. Hill apparently was not

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<sup>35</sup> "Notes From Western York," *Yorkville Enquirer*, 7 November 1888, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress, <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1888-11-07/ed-1/seq-2/>>.

<sup>36</sup> "Letter From Bullock's Creek," *Yorkville Enquirer*, 2 January 1889, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress, <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1889-01-02/ed-1/seq-3/>>.

the only one aware of the value of the railroad because the few residences that were there quickly built a depot.<sup>37</sup> This depot would become a bone of contention between the newly forming town of Sharon and the already existing town of Yorkville. According to articles in the *Yorkville Enquirer*, the depot that was built in Sharon was shut down between April and August of 1889.<sup>38</sup> There were feelings of animosity on both sides with allegations from the Yorkville citizens claiming the Sharon community was enticing its residents into relocating to Sharon, and the Sharon community accusing the Yorkville residents of bribing railroad officials to close the Sharon depot.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, the most valid argument the residents of the Sharon community made was, that without the depot in Sharon their local farm products could not be taken to market as easily. This caused the Railroad Commission to hold a meeting to decide the fate of the Sharon Depot. An article in the 4 September 1889 edition of the *Yorkville Enquirer* describes a meeting of the Railroad Commission which was held in Columbia that established a permanent depot in Sharon.<sup>40</sup> The significance of the railroad to a fledgling community can be seen when looking at the histories of Rock Hill, South Carolina and the neighboring community of Ebenezer. When the railroad came through this area, the projected route ran through the community of Ebenezer but the residents of Ebenezer wanted nothing to do with the

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<sup>37</sup> "Letter From Sharon," *Yorkville Enquirer*, 19 February 1890, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress, <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1890-02-19/ed-1/seq-2/>>.

<sup>38</sup> "The Sharon Station Trouble," *Yorkville Enquirer*, 21 August 1889, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress, <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1889-08-21/ed-1/seq-2/>>.

<sup>39</sup> "Notes From Hoodtown," *Yorkville Enquirer*, 12 June 1889, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress, <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1889-06-12/ed-1/seq-2/>>.

<sup>40</sup> "The Sharon Depot," *Yorkville Enquirer*, 4 September 1889, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress, <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1889-09-04/ed-1/seq-2/>>.

railroad. The folks residing in Rock Hill, South Carolina, about five miles away, welcomed the railroad, donating land for the track as well as a depot. In the end, Ebenezer became a neighborhood in the city of Rock Hill, as Rock Hill later grew in population because of the railroad depot and the numerous commercial and economic opportunities that often follow the railroad.

With a guaranteed depot in Sharon, Hill loaded his wares into a wagon and proceeded to the town of Sharon. Upon his arrival, he found that there was already competition set up and operating in Sharon. The two mercantile stores that already existed in Sharon were the Lowry, Starr, and Ross Mercantile and the Kennedy Brothers and Barron Mercantile.<sup>41</sup> Soon after opening Hill & Company Mercantile in Sharon, Hill bought out the firm of Lowry, Starr, and Ross thus leaving the residents of Sharon with two mercantile stores to patronize. This condition remained unchanged until 1905 when Hill and the Kennedy Brothers merged. It is possible that what happened next was entirely by design on the part of Hill. The partnership of these two mercantile stores created the firm Hill, Kennedy & Co.<sup>42</sup> Compelled to further investigate Hill's involvement in regards to this merger, it was discovered that he [Hill] never intended this merger to last. This can be seen through the wording in the law suit the Kennedy's filed against him, when he maneuvered to sever ties with the Kennedys in January 1907.<sup>43</sup> The answers for the questions regarding such an odd arrangement seem to point to the dissolution clause that was included in the merger. The partnership was intentionally set

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<sup>41</sup> "The Story of Sharon," *Yorkville Enquirer*, 29 December 1922, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1922-12-29/ed-1/seq-1/>>.

<sup>42</sup> Chris L. Kennedy, et al. vs. W. L. Hill. York County, South Carolina Court of Common Pleas (1907).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

up to expire, of its own accord, on 1 January 1907. In addition to expiring in January of 1907, a thirty day notice of dissolution must be given by the party wishing to dissolve the partnership. The contract also states that if none of the partners give a thirty day notice of dissolution, then the partnership shall run on a yearly basis.<sup>44</sup> It was Hill that terminated the partnership in 1907, leaving Hill & Co. the only mercantile in Sharon. The Kennedys did not take this dissolution lightly and subsequently filed the law suit. The Kennedys claimed that Hill over-valued his share of the store while under-valuing the Kennedys portion and Hill accused the Kennedys of the same behavior. In the end, Hill & Co. came out on top and from that point on Hill did whatever he could to benefit not only himself but the residents of Sharon as well. Hill knew he had not just moved his business to a new town but, like any farmer planting a new field, he was going to have to cultivate his business by weeding out the competition and nurturing the residents of the community. Not truly understanding this thought process, the question became, “how does somebody grow a town?”

When Hill & Co. first opened its door, Sharon was already a legally incorporated town: but it was little more than a few buildings around the all-important depot and a community of people anticipating a bustling city of the future. In 1891, a little over a year after relocating to Sharon, Hill was named one of four wardens.<sup>45</sup> In and among the myriad of papers left behind were blank request forms for convict labor, in other words chain gang labor. The term “warden” along with the blank convict labor request forms

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> “Sharon Notes,” *Yorkville Enquirer*, 14 January 1891, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1891-01-14/ed-1/seq-3/>>.

raised the question of whether Hill may have been involved with the law and the penal system. But this seemed daunting for any one person and thoughts verbalized, “how did you find the time to run a store and be the warden, as well as distribute the available chain gang labor?” Imagining a younger version of the man wearing a proverbial ear-to-ear grin, with a soft laugh, and a dictionary in hand, it was back to the research. When looking up the word warden in the dictionary it is found that an obscure definition of the word warden is, “a person entrusted with the oversight of something.” The something Hill and three other men were entrusted with was the legal establishment of the town of Sharon. Another responsibility of these wardens was to become the first town council members of Sharon, now that it was legally a town. For Hill and his fellow citizens, this period was probably very chaotic because as the town was forming they were expanding as well. Within eighteen months the residents of Sharon had not only welcomed the railroad, they had built a depot and several buildings for businesses to occupy, received a permanent post office, and became an incorporated town. For posterity sake and as a way of reinforcing the importance of his mercantile, to the community of Sharon, it should be noted that this permanent post office was located within the Hill & Company Mercantile. With the election of Warden added to the ever-expanding list of titles, Hill found himself catapulted to the ranks of a very select group. He had become a founding father.

This status, along with town council member and prominent businessman, may be the reason that the residents of Sharon seemed to turn to him whenever major decisions regarding the town of Sharon had to be made. There are numerous examples of Hill performing what can only be described as “doing one’s civic duty” and yet, he never

ran for nor was elected for the position of mayor. Common sense suggests if one never ran for an office, one would obviously never be elected. However, in Sharon's infancy this was not the case. The office of mayor in Sharon was not a coveted position. In fact, several elections never saw a candidate for mayor and the town council chose and elected an unsuspecting Sharon resident in abstention, in hopes that they would agree to serve as mayor for the next two years. The mayor of Sharon in 1913 drew the princely salary of \$50 a year, and one resident of Sharon suggested that, "By taking the job he subjects himself to two million dollars' worth of cussin per annum."<sup>46</sup> While this may be exaggerated, there is some truth to it. Today, the mayor of a town has incredible power and authority, as far as the running of the town goes. But at this time in Sharon's history, the mayor was little more than a meet and greet politician to be hounded almost daily by local constituents with their own trivialities, leaving the town council unencumbered to deal with the running of the town. There was no room or time in Hill's busy life for such pursuits; being just "a mayor" was not on the list of ambitions. Becoming the leading merchant for the surrounding communities was only the beginning; Hill had set his mind on plans to build the best mercantile in the up-state, and his methodical actions thus far resonated, "anything and everything I have done I did in pursuit of this one goal."

However, one of Hill's family members did serve as the mayor of Sharon: his oldest son and namesake, William L. Hill Jr., commonly called "Bill", was the mayor of Sharon for

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<sup>46</sup> "To Name Town Fathers," *Yorkville Enquirer*, 29 December 1922, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1922-12-29/ed-1/seq-3/>>.

the majority of the 1930's.<sup>47</sup>

While Hill was busy building his business and the community of Sharon, he was also hard at work manufacturing the tens of thousands of bricks he would need to build his vision of the perfect department store. Hill would need a site that had a considerable clay deposit as well as a means of transporting the newly-made bricks to the building site. His transportation needs were met by the newly installed railroad spar into Sharon, and a plot of land with a sizeable clay deposit was located adjacent to the spar, and just happened to be owned by Hill. An added benefit to this site was the possibility of gold and copper deposits. In attempting to locate the source of the bricks Hill used to build his mercantile building as well as his primary residence, it was discovered that a mine now called the Brown Mine was also located on the same parcel of land. According to U. S. Geological surveys, this mine primarily produced gold with a secondary metallic deposit of copper; however, it is the clay deposits that are of current interest.<sup>48</sup> According to these geological survey records, it can be seen that gold mines in the up-state area of South Carolina are rather numerous. The possibility of there being an active gold mine on one of Hill's properties raises a whole lot of secondary questions; however, since there are no records of this in the documents it becomes an adventure for another day. Research has yet to reveal any definitive records detailing the exact location of the clay deposits Hill used to cast the bricks to build his mercantile and home. The parcel of land suggested is

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<sup>47</sup> "'Bill' Hill former Sharon Mayor, dies at age 49." *Evening Herald*, 21 August 1961. York County Library, Rock Hill, South Carolina.

<sup>48</sup> Brown Mine, York County, South Carolina, USA," Mindat.org. Hudson Institute of Mineralogy. Accessed 13 April 2018, <https://www.mindat.org/loc-99630.html>.



only done so because it was owned by Hill, was in close proximity to the railroad spur into Sharon, and according to geologist's records, contained the necessary clay deposits.

In the late 1890's and early 1900's, there were two methods of making brick. The first method is commonly referred to as the extrusion method. In this method, the bricks are extruded from the machine and then cut into appropriate lengths. The second method involves clay being pressed into molds usually comprising anywhere from four to six blocks at a time. Regardless of which method is used, the brick was then baked in an oven. Hill used the second method and based on the available documents, the man he put in charge of making the brick was a W. Thompson Jackson. Census' records show W. Thompson Jackson was a brick-maker who frequently moved around the York and Chester counties area. A brick tradesman's magazine lists a "W. L. Hill" of Sharon, South Carolina purchasing brick-making machinery and professing to starting a brick and tile making business.<sup>49</sup> It would seem Hill found any and every means he could to be self-sufficient, make money, and benefit the Sharon community. Even so, starting a brick-making business would not have been a folly. Mr. William Ashe of McConnellsville, a scant ten miles away, had been making brick on his family's farm for some time. This Mr. Ashe was the founder of the Ashe Brick company which served the area for many years until being bought out by Boral Brick.<sup>50</sup> Another little known fact discovered during this phase of the research is that brick manufactured for construction purposes was

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<sup>49</sup> Windsor and Kenfield, "Brick," *The Tradesman* 16, no.1 (1902): 22, <https://books.google.com/books?id=vOs9AQAAAMAJ&lpg=PA22&dq=W.L.%20Hill%20sharon%20tile%20brick&pg=RA1-PA79#v=onepage&q=W.L.%20Hill%20sharon%20tile%20brick&f=false>.

<sup>50</sup> Local Brick Making History by Louise Pettus, Accession 1237, Box 67, Folder 228, Louise Pettus Papers, Winthrop University Archives, Rock Hill, South Carolina.

often manufactured on or close to the actual construction site. With so many bricks to produce in a predominantly rural farming community, Hill faced a serious labor shortage.

Life is full of many twists and turns, and when dealing with documents that are bordering on being one hundred years old, the connections they represented are often hard to distinguish. One of these conundrums was uncovered when around a dozen convict labor request forms were found within Hill's papers. Questioning aloud his reasons for having such documents, the answer echoed back through time, "All in good time, keep reading." Why would a merchant planter have such labor needs? Initially it appeared he may have used such labor to unload the rail cars as they delivered goods to his mercantile, but the truth was discovered while investigating the making of so many bricks. According to local historian Louise Petus, "Ashe used convict labor, loaned by the state."<sup>51</sup> Contained within Hill's customer records are numerous Ashes, an A. A. Ashe, Carrie Ashe, John F. Ashe, M. W. Ashe and a Marvin Ashe. Although no solid link to the founder of the Ashe Brick Company can be identified, it is probable that, like William Ashe, Hill used convict labor in the making of his brick. This conclusion is supported by the presence of the-"convict labor forms"-found in this collection. Even with "free" labor, he would still have a daunting task of making tens of thousands of brick in no more than two years. A local story gives another clue to how Hill accomplished this. It tells of Hill, after discovering that the bricks fired overnight were inferior to those fired during the day, visiting the brickyard one night to find the boys in charge of the fire asleep on the job. So Hill had bricks being made day and night for two years.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

The equipment that he used to make his brick was most likely a Steele's brick machine and was property named in a law suit filed by Frank Riddle, W. Thompson Jackson, and [W. L. Hill.]<sup>52</sup> The Steele Brick making machine was powered by a Liddel Engine and Boiler. The manufactures of both pieces of equipment were produced locally: the brick machine was manufactured in Statesville, North Carolina and the engine and boiler were manufactured in Charlotte, North Carolina. The Steele Company was founded in 1889 and the Liddel Company was started in 1900. Although the Liddel Company is no-longer in business, the Steele Company is still the manufacturer of brick making machines. It took Hill until 1913 to manufacture enough brick to build his new mercantile; however, he also manufactured enough brick to build himself a new home. With enough brick and more than enough ambition, Hill turned his attention to the operation of his store.

According to historian Le Gette Blythe, Hill started his mercantile business in relatively the same fashion as all of the big name department stores we recognize today.<sup>53</sup> Blythe surmises, the Hill & Co. mercantile started in the same way that Belk, J. C. Penny, Sears and Roebuck, as well as most of the other department stores commonly recognized today. Even having a relatively common beginning, the mercantile records do reveal some interesting aspects. One of these aspects is in the accounting or record-keeping equipment Hill used in his mercantile. The cash register is interesting in that it shows the

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<sup>52</sup> "Clerk's Sale," *Yorkville Enquirer*, 14 March 1911, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1911-03-14/ed-1/seq-3/>>.

<sup>53</sup> Le Gette Blythe, *William Henry Belk: Merchant of the South*. Enl. Ed., (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950), 84.

progression of such technology. The various customer records are dated from as early as 1915 to as late as the mid 1970's.

When Hill started his mercantile in 1890, his cash register did nothing but record the date of the purchase and the amount of each item purchased. Mercantile transaction records show this system being used up until 1926. There are very few documents in this collection dated prior to 1918, so it remains uncertain if the system being used in 1918 was also being used in the 1890's. Beginning in 1926, the system Hill started using provides much more information. This new system, along with recording the date and amount of purchase, also recorded the name of the item purchased. Hill used this system until the mid-1940's when the change was more than likely instituted by his son, James. The final cash register system used by Hill actually appears to devolve as this new system only records dates and amounts. There are many sources already in print that talk about how much various grocery items cost in the past, and while it is nostalgic to pursue, this data are not the most interesting aspect contained within the mercantile records. A more expected curiosity found within the mercantile records is the evidence of cottage industries. The records that support the cottage industry theory are receipts to customers showing the purchase of vegetables, butter, lard, and liver mush, just to name a few.<sup>54</sup> Liver mush is a meat product that is comprised of all the edible scraps that are created when a hog is butchered. These scraps are collected and sent through a meat grinder, mixed with seasonings and binders, then molded to form a meatloaf-type product. Meat, whether from a cow, a hog, a goat, or any other means is the one product that appears to

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<sup>54</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 67, Folders 6, 7, 10, 13, 17, 19, 37. Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

have not been a popular commodity sold at the mercantile, as the records show very little meat products being sold. The most logical conclusion is that Hill's customers, being mostly farmers, raised and butchered their own livestock for consumption, hunted and consumed wild game, or simply had diets high in vegetables and low in meat products.

No mercantile can survive just selling local goods and produce and this included The Hill & Co. Mercantile. In fact, based on the vendor records, Hill had a very long reach when it came to providing stock for his mercantile. Initially, orders were placed using the telegraph since records of many early orders are cable messages, as are the replies from the product manufacturers. Obviously in later years, products were ordered via the telephone. One of the most astonishing aspects of Hill supplying his customers with the products they desired is the speed in which he was able to get those goods to his store. Through mercantile vendor records it can be seen where Hill purchased entire railroad cars full of any number of items from as far away as Canada and within three to five days it would all be on the railroad siding right next to the store.<sup>55</sup> While a five day order-to-delivery time seems surprising, it is not nearly as amazing as the delivery time and frequency of certain commodities. Studying the records and learning the processes of Hill & Company provokes one to think aloud to Hill and to a Mr. Brown, a past employee of Hill's, "What is the one recollection, concerning the mercantile, that comes to mind above all other memories?"

The recollections of Herschel Brown, Sr. are those that one might expect from a teenager working his first job. Above all other duties and responsibilities of the day,

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<sup>55</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Boxes 29, 30, 31. Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

roasting the coffee beans each morning was first on the list. Coffee was a commodity which Hill sold a lot of, according to available mercantile records. Two additional big sellers were soft drinks and bakery products. Mercantile records show that Coca Cola, R C Cola, and Orange Soda were ordered and delivered approximately every other day. Bakery products, which included sliced bread, rolls, buns, and cracker and cookie packs, were delivered on an almost daily basis. At times, Hill would order an entire box car full of flour, and then have his younger employees re-package it into smaller more easily sold quantities. When Mr. Brown was asked what it was like doing that job, he responded with, “by the end of the day we would all look like ghosts or it could easily have been a car full of coal and, we would all go home looking like them darkies.”<sup>56</sup>

The flour and coal, as well as most other items bought in bulk, would be stored in the basement of the mercantile which also doubled as a root cellar, keeping perishable goods viable longer. According to Mr. Brown, Hill also stored barrels of apples down in the basement. One of the tasks assigned the young clerks at the mercantile was to go through these barrels of apples and remove those that were spoiled. As explained by Mr. Brown, “a rotten apple fight soon broke out among the young clerks.” The supply of rotten apples soon ran out but the fight continued with the good apples being thrown. The noise this particular apple fight produced soon garnered the attention of Hill, who was just one floor above. Upon inquiring as to the commotion down in the basement, Herschel and his compatriots claimed they were just killing rats, and Hill replied in the

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<sup>56</sup> Herschel Brown, Sr. (former Hill & Co. employee), interviewed by Paul Laffredo III, Sharon, South Carolina, 22 April 2017.

affirmative, “good boys kill them all, kill them all”<sup>57</sup> During the interview with Mr. Brown, he revealed that Hill had a habit of repeating whatever he said last. When asked to elaborate, Mr. Brown referred back to the rotten apple fight stating that Hill, at least in this situation, repeated the phrase, “kill them all.”<sup>58</sup> It was later learned that this act of repeating himself was a tick that was acquired later in life and not something he had all along. This fact was also revealed in an oral interview with another past employee; however, the woman interviewed wished to remain anonymous. The cause of Hill’s tick launched another search resulting in the discovery of a newspaper snippet in the 26 April 1907 issue of the *Yorkville Enquirer* about Hill recovering from a mule kick. Reading one hundred year old musings, one might possibly hear Hill echoing through the decades, “I was just gitting on in years” Mr. Brown, now a nonagenarian, talked at length of many memories with Hill and the Hill family.

One such memory involves the eldest of Hill’s children, William Lawrence Hill, Jr., commonly referred to as Bill Jr. It was after a particularly busy day that Bill Jr., along with some of the other clerks, had planned an afternoon of fishing once the store had closed up for the day. Part of Bill Jr.’s responsibilities at the end of the day was to rectify all of the cash register drawers with the daily purchases. Unknown to Bill Jr. and the other clerks, Hill had removed twenty dollars from one of the cash drawers, as a means of checking whether Bill Jr. was doing his job. As the boys were locking up, Hill asked Bill Jr. if all the cash drawers were accounted for. Bill Jr. answered in the affirmative declaring, “All the drawers are accounted for Pop; we’re headed out to catch some

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

fish.”<sup>59</sup> Mr. Brown went on to say that apparently Hill put the twenty dollars back into the cash drawer it was taken from and nothing was ever said of this incident again, although he and Bill Jr. agonized over whether or not Hill knew they had not rectified the cash drawers that day. When asked, the most prevalent question one would desperately want to ask Hill had he been alive to answer might be, “What did you find most amazing about the mercantile?” Mr. Brown’s response was “There was always something to do, never just sitting around.”<sup>60</sup>



*Hill & Co. mercantile*

The Hill Store Collection contains more than 2600 customer records spanning more than thirty years. Just glancing through them it does not take long to see, Hill’s

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.



reach as well as his reputation seemed to be endless. One of the strangest inconsistencies found within the customer records belong to no one particular customer in general but to approximately a dozen young, single women. It is possible that some of these customers were older, unmarried women or even housewives; however, the majority of these customers were listed as being school teachers residing at various boarding houses or rental properties in the area. Why Hill chose to record this information on the customer



*Grand staircase*

record cards of some of these women and not others may never be known but it does help us understand the demographics of his customer base. According to mercantile customer records, young women would visit his shop, purchase nothing, and then return thirty days later. These unusual visits often occurred early in the spring and or fall. These very same women, on the second trip, would spend around ten dollars and then disappear from mercantile records till the fall.

Further research into why these young women only came into the store twice a year revealed an unexpected answer. The Hill & Company mercantile was a grand affair, at least for the residents of Sharon and the surrounding communities. Designed and built by Julian S. Starr, an architect from Rock Hill, South Carolina,<sup>61</sup> there were four levels including a basement. In the center of the store was a grand staircase leading up three flights of stairs with a skylight in the center. Each floor was designated to certain items sold; the first floor was for general merchandise. Located on the second floor and the source of great pride for Hill was the millinery. These young ladies were coming into the

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<sup>61</sup> "National Register of Historic Places Registration Form," NPGallery, Accessed 5 April 2018, [https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/NRHP/94001572\\_text](https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/NRHP/94001572_text).

mercantile and ordering bonnets for the spring and or fall. Just having someone capable of designing and making women's hats willing to setup shop in the mercantile is a great asset; however, having those hat designs recognized and talked about on the streets of Paris, France is quite the accomplishment.<sup>62</sup> The millinery opened 1 April 1914 after weeks of advertisement and fanfare in the local newspaper, announcing the opening and designs by milliner Ms. Corrigan of Baltimore, Maryland. How did a hat designer from Baltimore end up plying her trade in Sharon? How did Ms. Corrigan's designs end up on the streets of Paris? Perhaps a young lady accompanied her father on a business trip resulting in a grand adventure or one of Hill's customers wore Ms. Corrigan's fashions while on holiday. How the hat designs made their way to Paris may never be known, but when news of it reached him, he must have at least in some way felt an enormous sense of pride. Also, included in the mercantile records are individual customer purchase records. In addition to the individual prices of items for sale, there are other fascinating details about life in the early 1900's.

Contained in the mercantile records are individual customer records, which as previously stated contain some interesting data. One of those amazing facts concerned a product that is still widely consumed today by people all over the world, Coca-Cola. The original recipe for Coca-Cola contained the drug cocaine. The consumers of this "tonic", as it was originally marketed, began referring to this product as a "dope." The irony of this is that the manufacturers of Coca-Cola removed the cocaine from their formula around 1903; however, mercantile records from the late 1910's through the early 1920's

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<sup>62</sup> Anonymous former Hill & Co. employee, interviewed by Paul Laffredo III, Sharon, South Carolina, 29 April 2017.

show the product still being referred to as a “dope.” The amazing part of this is that there are people alive today that still refer to a Coca-Cola as a “dope.” My wife’s grandmother, who passed in 2000, as well as some older members of our church still referred to this beverage as a “dope” even though they never sampled a Coca-Cola containing cocaine.

Another aspect that this researcher found incredible and almost impossible to comprehend was the sale of dynamite over the counter. Buying dynamite, or any explosive materials for that matter, will generally get a person not only arrested but most likely labeled as a domestic terrorist in today’s society. When more than one receipt/invoice for dynamite was discovered in the Hill Store Collection, it became a question of, “How is this legally possible?” With more questions than answers and looking for proof of suppositions, the next collection box was opened. As if directed by Hill himself the collection yielded an advertisement for the purchase of a Thompson sub-machine for only \$200.00.<sup>63</sup> Apparently, fully automatic machine guns were legal to sell as well in the 1920’s. This weapon was designed and introduced in 1918; unfortunately it was not available during WWI. The initial consumers of the Thompson were the United States Postal Inspectors and the Mob-era gangsters of the 1920’s and 1930’s. With war looming on the horizon in Europe at the end of the 1930’s and American involvement in the 1940’s, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps became the largest purchaser of the Thompson. Studying one hundred year old customer records transports a person back through the decades and thoughts seem to take on their own voice whispering, “Too much money for folks around here, besides that, there just wasn’t the need. See back in

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<sup>63</sup> Advertisement, Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 76, Folder 2. Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

them days, round here, least ways, folks tended to buy only what they needed.” This brings the conversation full-circle back to dynamite. If the people around Sharon only bought what they needed, what did they need dynamite for? The simplest answer: Sharon was a farming community. Lands must be cleared before they can be turned into farm fields for planting. The land might have large rocks and huge stumps that need to be removed; what better way to make a big rock or stump a small rock or stump than to blast it with dynamite? Purchasing explosives and machine guns over the counter and by anyone that has the cash is obviously a matter of context. A phone call to the Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms Bureau produced a surprisingly different answer. Unfortunately, the agent was not permitted to be quoted but he was able to provide some fascinating information. The Safe Explosives Act of 1986 makes the owning and possession of such devices legal. It appears that as long as the weapon was manufactured prior to 1986 and one is willing to pay for all the appropriate licenses and fees, it is still legal to own a Thompson sub-machine gun. As for the dynamite, according to the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agent, the usage of dynamite on farms is legal and can be purchased at most of the larger farm supply stores.

While reviewing the mercantile records, one customer stands out above all the rest, accounting for forty six record cards spanning nearly a decade. J. R. Graves patronized Hill & Co. frequently from March of 1932 through February of 1940. An exhaustive study of the mercantile records was conducted, in hopes of clarifying just who Mr. Graves was to Hill. While the records are very informative, they gave no inkling to the relationship between Hill and Graves. Turning to other historical records including

newspapers, census records, and death records, a connection began to take shape. An article in the 6 January 1905 edition of the *Yorkville Enquirer* was used to announce to the general public that a Mr. J. A. Graves would assume the role of superintendent of all of Hill's farms and external business of the store.<sup>64</sup> The position of superintendent has several definitions in today's job market, but very few a hundred years ago. The 1900 United States census shows a J. A. Graves with a large family and two servants living at Bullocks Creek.<sup>65</sup> Mr. J. A. Graves was born in Alabama in the mid 1850's and would have been raised in the same mindset as Hill. The Hill & Company mercantile was growing and Hill had just taken on the partnership with the Kennedy brothers; he needed someone to "over-see" his outside interests while he concentrated on the store. The one thing these documents showed was that Graves purchased enough supplies to operate more than one farm, either that or Graves had the largest, or one of the largest farms in the county. Further investigation into Mr. Graves and his connection to Hill revealed that in addition to being his overseer, he [Graves] was also Sharon's first chief of police.<sup>66</sup> There was one additional item concerning the mercantile and that deals with the design of the mercantile itself. The grand staircase in the middle of the store, as impressive as it may sound, is not the most fascinating aspect of the building that Hill designed and built.

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<sup>64</sup> "In Counties Adjoining," *Yorkville Enquirer*, 06 January 1905, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress, <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1905-01-06/ed-1/seq-4/>>.

<sup>65</sup> "United States Census, 1900," citing enumeration district ED 87, sheet 13A, family 248, NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1972), FHL microfilm 1,241,545, Family Search, Accessed 5 July 2018, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M3T1-MGC>.

<sup>66</sup> *Yorkville Enquirer*, "The Story of Sharon."

Based on Hill's own admissions as to his lack of formal education it is not beyond the scope of reason to believe he had help in designing and building his fantastical modern



*Dumb waiter*

day department store. Located in the rear of the store, on the right as you walked through the store was a dumb waiter.

Most people are familiar with a dumb waiter and what it was used for; however, this was not the usual dumb waiter system. This dumb waiter was more along the lines of a freight elevator that was operated by a system of ropes and pulleys. This system was used by the employees of the

mercantile to bring inventory to the appropriate floor where it

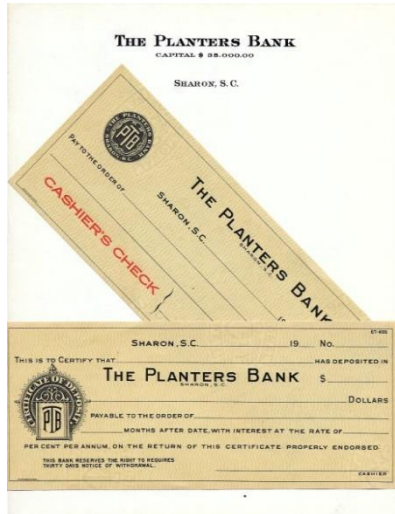
was being displayed. As time passed, this system was upgraded but never replaced and one can imagine the gratitude of all of his employees when an electric motor was installed, no-longer requiring the ropes and pulleys, not to mention the numerous young clerks to operate it. This dumb waiter/freight elevator system is still in place and can be viewed when visiting the home and garden style store that currently occupies the old mercantile today.

Over the decades, the Hill & Company mercantile would experience many changes and renovation. In time, Hill would bring electricity to his mercantile and Sharon, South Carolina. When the automobile became affordable for the average consumer, he brought in a car dealership, which was located on the ground floor of his mercantile. Yes, the showroom and the mercantile shared floor space, as did other facets of his business and economic ventures, such as the millinery, a telephone office, and a

bank. It was about this time in our imagined conversation that Hill just sat up and declared, “that’s all there is to the mercantile son, so I suppose this here conversation has come to a close.” Hating to disagree with him out of fear of his shutting down, but this was actually nothing more than the machinations of a tired mind; thus, it was agreed that at least for now we were finished. Acting more confused than I supposed he would have been, Hill may have asked, “what else is there to talk about son, there isn’t much more to the mercantile, you done seen and asked about most everything I can think on.”

Explaining to him that in reality we had just begun this conversation and that the next thing that needed to be discussed was the bank, it is easily imagined Hill sitting back in his rocking chair, cracked that little smile of his, and as he nodded off, I thought I heard him say, “that’s a conversation for another day son, seems all our daylight has gone and faded away on us.” Although finished for the day, there would be other days. Days spent contemplating the actions of Hill and just who was benefitting most from those actions.

## The Bank



*Planters Bank sample documents*

In 1918 Hill opened Planters Bank, which was located in the back left hand side of the ground floor of the mercantile.<sup>67</sup> The actual wooden partition that made up the cashiers cage is currently on display by the owner of the mercantile building and can be seen by all. Apart from being a merchant and planter, after moving to Sharon, Hill was also a landlord. Along with the mercantile, he had five working farms, all of which provided him a rather comfortable living, not to mention the cotton warehouses and the cotton gin. There is also ample evidence contained in the State Bank Examiner's Reports from 1920 through 1930 which show that Hill was either share cropping or tenant farming properties foreclosed upon by Planters Bank. Hill & Company had been operating as a sort of bank since he started it, offering loans and credit accounts to its patrons; therefore the reason behind the creation of Planters Bank was puzzling. Was it a means of maintaining some sense of control over his business life and the life of Sharon itself? Was there a more altruistic reason for its creation or did he simply see a means of advancing his own fortunes at the expense of his community?

When one does a historiography, concerning banks and banking in the early part of the 1900's, there are two main lines of thought. For those that ascribe to the C. Vann Woodward school of thought, "the National Banking Act was framed during the Civil

<sup>67</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 4, Folder 5. Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.



War to fit the convenience of Northern and non-agricultural interests.”<sup>68</sup> Woodward also attempts to show just how serious the dearth of Southern banks or Southern banking opportunities that were available to southerners, “At the beginning of the 1900’s there was, in the whole country, one bank per every 16,600 inhabitants, there was in the cotton states one per every 58,130 inhabitants.”<sup>69</sup> Woodward also shows the seriousness of the situation on a smaller scale by reducing the cotton states even further, “One hundred and twenty three counties in Georgia, at this time, were without an incorporated bank of any kind, state or national.”<sup>70</sup> Basically Woodward is saying that there were no banks, or in the least, very few banks located in the South.

This situation, either no banks or minimal available banking opportunities, presents a good reason to start a bank of your own; however, this was not the case for the residents of Sharon or even for Hill. Located within reasonable distance from Sharon, and even within Sharon itself, were numerous banking institutions. Not only was there a bank in Sharon, Sharon National Bank, but most, if not all the surrounding communities: Yorkville, Chester, Hickory Grove, Clover, and Rock Hill all contained banks. The fact that Sharon and all of Sharon’s surrounding communities had a bank, places Woodward’s claims of there not being adequate banking institutions in the South as inaccurate. If Woodward’s claims of the lack of financial institutions being present are not accurate, then one must consider the accuracy of Tindall’s claims as well. Were the number of available financial institutions in and around the Sharon community an anomaly; thus

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<sup>68</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*. A History of the South, V. 9, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 168.

<sup>69</sup> Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, 183.

<sup>70</sup> Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, 183.

rendering both Tindall and Woodward correct? It is possible that an anomaly did exist within the local area; however, without further research into the number of banks that did exist, that question cannot be answered.

In his book, *The Emergence of the New South*, Tindall claims that, “Southern banks were particularly vulnerable to economic distress because the large number of small state banks were poorly supervised and regulated, lacking experienced and competent management.”<sup>71</sup> This is not the chief reason for the financial situation of the South, according to Tindall. Tindall explains the reason for the poor banking conditions in the South: “the most spectacular cycle of failures was set in motion across the mid-south by the collapse of Caldwell and Company in Nashville, in November of 1930.”<sup>72</sup> Tindall goes on to explain that Caldwell and Company was “founded in 1917 as a municipal bond house specializing in Southern issues.”<sup>73</sup> According to Tindall, Caldwell and Company was a significant player when it came to organizing the New South, noting that, “this Morgan of the South” brought some \$120,000,000 into the region through the sale of Southern securities and large additional sums of working capital through loans from eastern banks, newspapers, and investment trusts.”<sup>74</sup> When the Tindall reasoning is applied to Hill and his situation, the pieces just do not fit.

First, the collapse of Caldwell and Company cannot be the motivating factor behind the opening of Planters Bank because the dates actually run concurrently with each other. According to Tindall, “Caldwell and Company was founded in 1917” which

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<sup>71</sup> George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 366.

<sup>72</sup> Tindall, 366.

<sup>73</sup> Tindall, 366.

<sup>74</sup> Tindall, 366.

was one year before Hill opened Planters Bank.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, York County, South Carolina Court of Common Pleas documents show that Hill voluntarily turned Planters Bank over to the Banking Department of South Carolina on 30 January 1931<sup>76</sup> and Tindall tells us that Caldwell and Company collapsed financially in “November 1930.”<sup>77</sup> The second part of the Tindall argument is that the smaller Southern banks were incompetently run by poorly educated people only [half pans out.] Hill expressed regret over his own lack of formal education; however, he was not the only member of the board of directors for that bank. Newspaper articles in the *Yorkville Enquirer* show that from its conception the board of directors consisted of:

One physician	Dr. Charles O. Burrus
One school teacher	Arthur Miles Erwin
Two farmers	George Frederick Hambright John Egger Latham
Two merchants	William Lawrence Hill, Sr. J. D. Goode

With a board that included a physician, a teacher, and fellow merchants, as well as including local farmers, the lack of education cannot be reconciled with the Sharon example. The lack of education, experience, or competent management argument further falls apart when the State Bank Examiner’s Reports, hereinafter referred to as Examiner’s Report, are evaluated. Like most everything connected with this collection there are gaps

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<sup>75</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 4, Folder 5. Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>76</sup> William L. Hill. vs. L. A. Erwin, et al. York County, South Carolina Court of Common Pleas (1931).

<sup>77</sup> Tindall, 366.

in the records. One such gap exists within the Examiner's Reports. The reports stretch almost the entire length of the 1920's with the exception of two years, 1928 and 1929. Unfortunately the two years that are missing are the most crucial, not just for the story of Planters Bank, or even for the Hill saga, but for all of history itself. How the bank was fairing during 1928 is crucial to the big picture of the bank's health, Also ,the status of the bank in 1929 and how the crash of the stock market affected it could have been quite revealing; especially, since the court had to rule on the solvency of Planters Bank during 1928 and 1929.<sup>78</sup> It is by looking at the bank records consecutively we see how Hill formed his bank and it is through the Examiner's Reports that we begin to see why he started the bank.

To create Planters Bank, Hill and a group of eight other individuals, pooled their resources and with an operating capital of \$35,000 formed Planters Bank. Once the bank was formed Hill moved his customer accounts and his vender accounts, along with the Hill Mercantile established lines of credit to the bank's list of account holders and loans, thus creating an appearance of stability to the bank. Over the course of the bank's life span the Board of Directors names would change; however, the president and vice president positions as well as their cashier would remain the same. Hill was president and holding the lion's share of



*Planters Bank cashier's cage*

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<sup>78</sup> Tindall, 366.

the bank, G. F. Hambright was vice president and, according to the Bank Examiner's reports J. D. Hambright was cashier.

Looking at the Examiner's Reports, one can see that for all the years covered, Hill had more than enough lines of credit established for his own personal needs as well as for Hill Mercantile. From the creation of the bank until its final days, Hill had open lines of credit with the Murchison National Bank in Wilmington, North Carolina; National Union Bank in Rock Hill, South Carolina; First National Bank in Richmond, Virginia; Hanover National Bank in New York; and American Trust Company in Charlotte, North Carolina. More importantly, at least for Hill and his ambitions, he now had access to federal monies, which may have been his intentions all along.

The federal money Hill wanted access to was from the War Finance Corporation. Through the War Finance Act of 1918, the War Finance Committee was created to ensure that all of America's resources were being directed at the war effort.<sup>79</sup> In addition the committee provided low interest loans for the production of or the expansion of anything and everything related to the war effort. Provided within this was a provision concerning war profiteering taxes as well as taxes in general and it seems that as long as loans did not exceed a \$5,000 limit there were no taxes paid on the profits rendered from the original loan. Planters Bank records do indicate that many of Hill's farming neighbors did in fact benefit from loans received through the War Finance Corporation, as did Hill.

This government program seems to make perfect sense, upon initial examination. America was embroiled in World War I and not only was there the need to supply the

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<sup>79</sup> Guaranteed Trust Company of New York, *War Finance Corporation Act*, (New York: Guaranteed Trust Company of New York, 1918), 8, Accessed 2 March 2018, <https://archive.org/details/warfinancecorpoguarrich/page/8>.

war effort but also the need to supply the needs of the American citizens as well. As far as those components of the war effort that were acquired through agriculture, there was just one way to improve crop yield in 1918, and that was placing more acreage under the plow. By providing low interest loans to farmers to increase the size of their farms and purchase modern farm equipment, more acreage was put under the plow. This strategy worked for only as long as the demand was greater than the supply. During World War I there was a great demand for cotton to use in explosives and artillery shells, as well as for clothing and bandages. Farmers, especially cotton farmers, thought they were finally about to make some money; however, all conflicts come to a close and the demand fell. Adding further to the farmers' plight, Mother Nature threw an agricultural crisis into the mix and the world market collapsed, all of which pushed the Southern cotton farmer even deeper into debt.

According to bank records, Hill not only used the money from the War Finance Corporation to help his customers expand their farms but also to expand his own farms. Records also show that he used the same farmer's accounts to secure lines of credit with multiple out of state banks.<sup>80</sup> It may also be possible that some of the farmers, whose names these loans were in, were either tenant farmers or share croppers farming Hill's personal farms.<sup>81</sup> Bank records also show Hill had either tenant farmers or share croppers

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<sup>80</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Boxes 5, 6, Folders 3, 4, 6. Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>81</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Boxes 8, 9, 10, Folders 1, 2, 3. Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

farming properties foreclosed on by Planters Bank, with the proceeds going into his private coffers.<sup>82</sup> This was not the only means of profit for him.

On the Examiner's Report for 1918, Planters Bank consisted of space rented from the mercantile for \$300.00 a year, an expense account of \$800.00 a year for the operation of a posting machine, and the shared vault and safe located within the mercantile. By 1920, the bank holdings looked a lot differently and it became a little clearer as to why Hill started Planters Bank. Under South Carolina banking guidelines and the Examiner's Report, Planters Bank was only allowed to write loans with a maximum of \$5000.00 per loan. However, the reports also show that Hill, as bank president, used his authority to write larger loans for Planters Bank. By close examination of these bank reports, certain thoughts begin to take shape and questions earlier asked begin to take on new meanings. The one conclusion that is most obvious is that for every dollar generated by the residents of Sharon and the community of Sharon, Hill received a portion of each.

In 1920, Hill or more technically Planters Bank, wrote sixteen loans with all but four of them being within legal limits. Of the four loans exceeding legal limits, one belonged to Hill & Co. for \$50,000; are two loans, \$33,500 and \$13,000, to a J. N. McGill; and the last loan was written to a Shannon & Plexico for \$17,000.<sup>83</sup> It is easy coming to terms with how the president of a bank can loan himself \$50,000, but how do you justify your bank writing three loans, two for three times the legal limit and the other for seven times the limit? In the case of the Shannon and Plexico loan, the motive may be

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<sup>82</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1925, Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 8, Folder 1, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>83</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1920, Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 8, Folder 1, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

just as plain when one comes to understand the Shannon & Plexico loan was to a Hill & Co. competitor. The 1920 census lists Shannon as a department store owner and Plexico a drug store owner. Logic would dictate that a competent banker would at some point tell his customer no, I am sorry but you are already mortgaged to the hilt. This makes a person wonder if Hill purposely allowed the Shannon & Plexico loan to get into such a state that foreclosure was inevitable. Is it possible that Hill eliminated another competitor just like he did the Kennedys, when first coming to Sharon? Other questions surfaced during the evaluation of the Examiner's Reports: where was the money from the War Finance Act, and why was it not being used to keep these farmers from losing their properties? Another perplexing realization also begins to take form: Hill started his bank in 1918 and yet there are no documents in the collection that indicated he had any contact with the War Finance Department until 1922, almost four or five years after opening the bank. One reason for this lack of contact, or apparent lack of contact, is simply the necessary documents are missing. This may be the case in some circumstances regarding the Hill Store Collection, as it is incomplete; however, in this situation the claim will not bear scrutiny. From the 1918 inception of Planters Bank to the 1931 closing, the only Examiner's Reports missing are the critical years of 1928 and 1929. In 1922 the reports list two new outside financial institutions, the War Finance Corporation and the Third National Bank of Gastonia, North Carolina with which Planters Bank had dealings. Seemingly ill-fated loans practices and the fact that Hill waited so long to get involved with the War Finance Corporation, making no attempt to use such a resource to aid those that were going to lose their farms, their businesses, and quite possibly any dignity that



they had left, lend credence to the theory that he did not open the bank for altruistic means but rather by self-motivating factors.

In the case of the loan written for J. N. McGill, again the questions of why and what was so special that, as bank president, Hill would extend three to seven times the credit the bank was allowed to lend on a single loan. Mr. McGill could have been the victim of the collapse of the cotton market in 1920, or perhaps this is another example of him using his power and authority at the bank in order to acquire the land holdings he desired the most. Tindall tells us of two market collapses, one in 1914 and another in 1920: while the first “cost the cotton market \$500,000,000”,<sup>84</sup> Tindall does not venture an estimate of the losses associated with the 1920 collapse but instead reminds us of the impending doom facing the cotton industry that was coming out of Texas, the boll weevil.<sup>85</sup> Not only is Tindall telling us of the boll weevil crisis, he is also telling us that farmers, like McGill, were guilty of “instead of holding back some of the profits, farmers spent their money and bought new lands at inflated prices.”<sup>86</sup> There are many good books written by excellent historians, such as Studs Terkel, suggest the 1920’s were not as they say “the roaring 20’s.” Terkel who in two of his greatest works, *The Good War* and *Hard Times*, attempts to show the readers that there was a great disparity in exactly who was reaping the financial benefits of the period. Regardless of what historians may claim about the 1920’s, at least according to the remaining Planters Bank and Hill & Company Mercantile records, the 1920’s for Sharon, South Carolina was feast or famine, all dependent on the cotton prices. We may never know what motivated Hill in his actions

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<sup>84</sup> Tindall, 34.

<sup>85</sup> Tindall, 121.

<sup>86</sup> Tindall, 112.

but we can see the results which came about because of them. Another distinct possibility is, as Tindall suggests and Hill himself confirmed, the lack of education and experience was the ultimate reason the bank closed. It is also a possibility that Hill was not as uneducated as he liked people to think he was; the reality being he was, as the saying goes, “as sly as a fox” and there was a plan behind all of his actions. These are but a few possible answers as more and more questions pile up when studying the Examiner’s Reports.

The basic content and format of the Examiner’s Reports are very straightforward making it very easy to find the most pertinent information. The bank examiner’s initial comments, the section on outstanding loans, and the bank examiner’s findings are of particular interest.<sup>87</sup> While still examining the 1920 report, we find that Hill and Planters Bank are heavily vested in municipal bonds. Planters Bank is holding bonds in: First National Bank of Sharon, Catawba Township; York County Sinking Fund Account; and Broad River Township Highway Commission Fund. There are also three additional bonds for Sinking Fund Account, York County, and the Broad River Fund.<sup>88</sup> While the records do not show the level of investment Planters Bank had in each of these bond accounts, they do show one account of great significance: the Broad River Fund. The question now becomes how does a bank with only \$35,000 of operating capital, upon startup, manage in two years to float a \$45,000 bond package? With new found questions we turn to the last page of the 1920 Examiner’s Report for his general overall comments concerning the condition of the bank. The report is as follows: “J. N. McGill note is doubtful as they are

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<sup>87</sup> State Bank Examiner’s Report 1920.

<sup>88</sup> State Bank Examiner’s Report 1920.

currently in receivership, loans are well distributed and fairly well secured. Some loans have insufficient security. Bank losses are not expected to be heavy except for the McGill note. Bank loans \$60,000 on mortgages and \$90,000 on cotton which is well margined.”<sup>89</sup>

As one progresses on to the 1921 Examiner’s report, it becomes clear that Planters Bank has not only managed to gain enough capital in two years to float \$45,000 in municipal bonds, but also has written \$60,000 in mortgages and \$90,000 on cotton. The initial comments of the 1921 bank examiner and consecutive bank examiners state that, “W. L. Hill is the owner of Hill & Co. and owes the bank \$19,670 which should go against W. L. Hill’s liability.”<sup>90</sup> (Appendix A) Including Hill’s loans there were a total of thirty six loans, thirty two of which fell below the \$5,000 limit for which Planters Bank was allowed to write loans. Of the four loans that were over the limit: two loans belonged to Hill & Co. totaling almost \$20,000, the previously mentioned McGill note for \$16,000 already under foreclosure, and a new loan belonging to the Goode family totaling \$12,500. The bank examiner’s notes sum up Planters Bank loans and liabilities for 1921 stating, the “Bank has total past due \$35,396.32. There will be a probable loss \$2,000 on note Robert McCaw. \$4,500 and \$71.00 on note Wm. Griffin. Cashier believes no other losses will be sustained”<sup>91</sup> and “Only one account on deposits subject to check and that is President W. L. Hill \$34,723.07 which bears five percent interest.”<sup>92</sup> However, it is the bank examiner’s final comments that bear the most significance: “the bank has a good

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<sup>89</sup> State Bank Examiner’s Report 1920.

<sup>90</sup> State Bank Examiner’s Report 1921, Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 2, Folder 3. Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>91</sup> State Bank Examiner’s Report 1921.

<sup>92</sup> State Bank Examiner’s Report 1921.

many loans which are insufficiently secured but cashier believes these can be worked out without loss. (Appendix B) Attention has been called to excess liabilation [sic] of some of the directors and cashier promises to have these matters arranged. President is in excess by reason of Hill & Co. obligations. Clerical condition is excellent.”<sup>93</sup> Given the large amounts and conditions of the loans Planters Bank held, it is disturbing how year after year the bank examiners continued to rate the condition of the bank as excellent.

The Examiner’s Report for 1922 is short, but this may be due to the records being incomplete; however, it may also be because the bank examiner either did not look too close or maybe he just liked what he saw. The examiner’s initial comments concerned the excess liability of the H.W. Shannon loan as well as the discounted paper of Hill & Co. Discounted paper is the term used when a bank reduces the interest rate on a loan. The bank still had a good many loans with insufficient securities and losses may reach \$12,000. The differences from previous reports resulted from Planters Bank starting to accumulate foreclosed property, which Hill would eventually profit from. The 1922 report gives the first solid documentation between Planters Bank and the War Finance Corporation.<sup>94</sup>

It became more evident that Planters Bank was more to Hill than just one extension of the empire he was building. The previous Examiner’s Reports showed that the largest single bank liability was that of Hill & Co., to the tune of around \$50,000. As it happened, the 1922 report showed that Hill received two loans from the War Finance Corporation; one was for \$33,300 and the other was for \$25,000, for a combined total of

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<sup>93</sup> State Bank Examiner’s Report 1921.

<sup>94</sup> State Bank Examiner’s Report 1922, Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 3, Folder 1. Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

\$58,300. Strangely enough this figure is awfully close to what the bank examiner listed as the Hill & Co. liability.<sup>95</sup> The War Finance Corporation could have been a last minute attempt at stabilizing the bank or maybe this was all part of a grander scheme. One wonders if Hill was using Planters Bank to increase his own fortunes and possibly the bank was an avenue for avoiding or writing off the debt of Hill & Co. Exactly what were you up to Mr. Hill? Were you nothing more than a carpet bagger, out to fleece your neighborhood or was there a grand plan behind what you did? Were you a new breed of merchant as Woodward suggests, or were you just a chip of the old block of the Antebellum Southern Planter class?

The 1923 Examiner's report shows the McGill property was still in foreclosure and there was a difference of opinion between Planters Bank and the examiner over the amount of the actual loss Planters Bank would suffer. And, while the Shannon & Plexico loan was doubtful with foreclosure imminent, Planters Bank no longer had any loans, large or small, considered to be in excess. The largest eye opener is the amount of property now listed as being owned by the bank. The first piece of property Planters Bank took possession of was the J.P. Kersley Place, a 54 acre tract approximately seven miles southwest of Sharon. In addition to this is 251 acres between Sharon and Hickory Grove, 648 acres at Hickory Grove, and a  $\frac{3}{4}$  interest in a property listed as H & L in Hickory Grove. The examiner's final comments are an indication of something not being quite right and yet Planters Bank received great accolades for its accomplishments that year by

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<sup>95</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1922.

reporting “bank is making a good start, President is a thorough and competent business man and a good judge of credit, we predict a steady growth for the institution.”<sup>96</sup>

Tindall notes that the people in charge of southern banks were uneducated and inexperienced, thus they were incapable of running the banks. Hill, in his own words claimed the lack of a formal education was his greatest misfortune and yet a bank examiner described him, the Bank President, as a thorough and competent businessman as well as a good judge of credit. Although the Examiner’s Reports are contradictory to what Tindall claims, his claims are bolstered by the other evidence contained in these documents. How competent or how good a judge of credit is one when it appears that the bank was constantly foreclosing on loans and facing the loss of thousands, if not tens of thousands, of dollars? So it seems that Tindall’s claim of inexperience and lack of education may be correct after all. Equally puzzling is just how did Hill or rather Planters Bank come into possession of almost 900 acres they did not own in 1922?

Moving through years of Examiner’s Reports, it becomes easier to glean the differences, bad and good, from each report. In 1924, besides the War Finance Corporation, Hill was dealing with two new financial institutions: the Third National Bank of Gastonia, North Carolina, which is just over the state line, and the Intermediate Credit Bank in Columbia, South Carolina. Nineteen twenty four also witnessed an extreme rise in not only the number of over-drawn accounts but also in the amount each account was over-drawn. In previous years the number of over-drawn accounts was minimal, with combined totals averaging around \$150.00 to \$200.00 for the entire year,

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<sup>96</sup> State Bank Examiner’s Report 1923, Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 5, Folder 3. Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

that particular report covered.<sup>97</sup> Planters Bank now had over a dozen accounts, with potential losses of \$1637.00, and had lost a total of \$3000.00 on thirteen other loans. Hill and a Planters Bank cashier accounted for the losses by vague explanations of repayment, as in the McGill account, or noting adequate collateral, such as the Shannon & Plexico note.

As in the previous year's report, the McGill mortgage was in bankruptcy. Also, there was a breakdown on how this mortgage was being cleared from the bank records without a loss to the bank. It appears that fifty one percent of the McGill note had been settled, with another twenty percent expected to be applied. What is not specified is who the McGill & Sons were as well as where the percentages originated. The most logical explanation is that these figures arrived from the selling of farm equipment and livestock, or from some type of inventory not yet sold off. The expected twenty percent may be from not yet sold land. Another factor thrown into the equation is the sum of \$2363.00 due the bank from a reserve account. It is possible that in order to write large loans Hill or possibly the state required the bank to have a reserve account in order to cover such eventualities; either way, according to Hill, "the balance should work out."<sup>98</sup> As for the Shannon & Plexico note, this was secured with their stock of merchandise, real estate, store, home and lot, the loss had yet to be determined but should work out. If this were not fortunate enough for Hill, his holdings would increase even more.

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<sup>97</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1924, Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 5, Folder 5. Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>98</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1923, Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 5, Folder 3. Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

By the end of 1924, Planters Bank records via the Examiner's Report lists the bank as owning: the Kessler tract, the Berry place, the Meeks place, the Moore place, McGill house and lot, the McNeil place, the Thompson place, the Smith place, and a store building and tenant house in Hickory Grove; all totaled this was approximately 1400 acres. Such a great accumulation of land is questionable: how was such a small, independent bank able to advance such sums of money, often losing money in the end, and yet still remain open for business? Equally puzzling is the number and amount of bonds carried by Planters Bank.

According to the bank examiner, in 1923, Planters Bank owned five shares of the 1<sup>st</sup> National Bank of Sharon, \$40,000.00 in Broad River Township Bonds, and an undisclosed number of Catawba Township Bonds. By 1924, the bond investments had grown considerably to include four Broad River Township Road Bonds which included the Sinking Fund Commission, four Liberty Bonds, fifteen non-descript Broad River Bonds, and a listing for Broad River Bonds with an attached notation, "held by loan & savings." The last entry gives no clarification to whether these bonds were being secured by "a loan & savings" or if they were being held by an additional outside financial institution. The latter is of the most concern, if, the bonds were being held by a third party then they were more than likely being used to secure lines of credit at more than one financial institution, Planters Bank being one of them. The overall comments of the 1924 examiner are, "general condition is good, several losses have been worked out with no losses to the bank."<sup>99</sup> Again one must wonder how a bank that had a starting capital of

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<sup>99</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1924, Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 5, Folder 5. Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.



only \$35,000.00 could write loans and then foreclose on almost 1400 acres, not to mention the accumulation of so many bonds, and not lose any money.

The 1925 Examiner's Report begins to shed light on the true workings of Planters Bank making one vocalize aloud, how and why are you doing what you are doing? In the year 1925, Hill foreclosed on yet another property, as well as began foreclosure proceedings against an A. T. & John D. Latham. Hill or rather Planters Bank had also acquired the Whiteside place and an additional 324 acres. The paper work on these acquisitions is not in the Hill Store Collection so it remains a mystery as to how he managed any of this. What is evident for the first time is the extent of just how much Hill owed and to whom.

In 1925 Hill and Planters Bank had four large outstanding loans. The first loan, as one might expect, was from the War Finance Corporation for \$15,000.00 and secured with \$36,000.00 of collateral. There was another loan from the Hanover National Bank for \$10,000.00 which was secured with collateral totaling \$14,265.00. Hanover National Bank was Hill's first line of financing and the most common financial institution from which he paid his vendors, especially his northern vendors. Mercantile documents show this was his primary account almost from the time the mercantile opened and remained so throughout his life. The last two financial obligations for 1925 belonged to Peoples National Bank and consisted of two loans. The first loan was for \$7,500.00 and was secured with \$10,064.00 worth of collateral, and the second loan was actually two notes, one for \$6,000.00 and the other for \$4,000.00, these loans were combined into one and secured with cotton. Planters Bank had \$42,500.00 of debt secured with nearly

\$70,000.00 worth of collateral.<sup>100</sup> In the course of studying the documents of Planters Bank to learn the content and location of the collateral, the documents began to unravel the true nature of the bank and possibly Hill's intentions.

A problem arises in the mathematics. In 1922 Hill had secured \$55,000.00 worth of government loans and by the end of 1925 that figure had been reduced to \$15,000.00. It is perplexing as to how he managed the finances of what appears to be a proverbial "house of cards." Planters Bank documents provide one possible answer, confirming Hill used his best bank and farm customers to secure multiple loans through multiple financial institutions. There are numerous customer lists showing how much they owed, how much cotton they had on hand, either in one of Hill's warehouses or at their "plantations"<sup>101</sup> and what loans these accounts were used to secure. When following this trail it became apparent that Hill was swapping names and accounts around so that collateral was presented as adequate security for that institution's line of credit. After careful examination it is clear that Hill was using the same individuals, whose accounts were impeccable, to secure multiple lines of credit.<sup>102</sup> Another possibility is that Hill was in some way using money that was not his to use in order to prop up or make the bank seem more stable than it actually was. Under a "Public Funds on Deposit" heading on the 1925 Examiner's Report, there is a listing for a Mr. W. D. Thomason, county treasurer, with a combined total of \$39,151.00 on deposit in two accounts at Planters Bank. Accounts like

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<sup>100</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1925.

<sup>101</sup> The word "plantations" is taken directly from Planters Bank documents where it was being used to describe customer farms where the cotton is located. This shows the mentality of Hill as well as the mentality of the state officials he dealt with. The term "plantation" is also used in numerous newspaper articles that deal with local crop reports, further establishing the general mentality of that time period.

<sup>102</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1925.

these could have very easily enabled Hill to carry on with his current actions by making the bank appear more solvent. The examiner's general comments in 1925 reflect they are noticing inconsistencies in Planters Bank practices: "The condition of the bank was fair, loans appear to be good but slow."<sup>103</sup> Once again the bank examiner cautioned the bank over the number of loans that exceeded the banks legal limit as well as some of the loans did not appear to show that they were approved. The bank examiner's suggestions were for the bank to pay closer attention to collections as well as reducing the number of loans outstanding. If these steps were taken, then the bank should prosper. Although the Hill Store Collection is incomplete, the assessment of a forensic accountant capable of reviewing these documents would probably bring even more questionable practices to light.

The 1926 Examiner's Report is a testament to stagnation; that is, it appears that 1926 was a continuation of more of the same conditions found in earlier reports. There were areas where Hill improved the bank conditions; however, the overall picture is it was "business as usual." Planters Bank now had around thirty overdrawn accounts; however, most of the accounts were overdrawn by \$5.00 or less with only four accounts being in the \$50.00 to \$300.00 range. The total of all overdrawn accounts also had been reduced by almost a third, going from almost a \$1600.00 yearly total to \$554.00 in 1926.<sup>104</sup> The most visible change occurred in the areas dealing with loans. No longer was just the loan amount and outstanding balance listed but the exact type of collateral and its location. The most common forms of collateral are acreage, homes, harvested and/ or

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<sup>103</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1925.

<sup>104</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1926, Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 9, Folder 1, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

future crops, and chattel; chattel could be anything the mortgagee owned, livestock, farm equipment, or even household goods.

During 1926, Hill or more directly, Planters Bank added another set of names to the list of properties acquired via foreclosed accounts. According to the documents, the Good family was next on the chopping block. There was a L. H. Good with a mortgage for \$13,644.00, and an H. C. Good with a mortgage of \$6466.00 for a combined total of \$20,110.00. The bank examiner believed the Good notes were destined for foreclosure in order to collect these loans. Also listed but not commented on by the bank examiner was the \$11,000.00 note belonging to Hill & Co. as well as the particulars on a new account holder named W. T. Smith with an outstanding loan for \$6750.00. Up to this point Planters Bank had lost approximately \$90,000.00 in potential mortgage payments, spread over the years spanning 1920 through 1926. It seems impossible that an unregulated bank can suffer such great losses and yet remain open for business.

The public funds accounts seem to have been the only thing keeping the bank solvent, at least on paper. In 1926, W. D. Thomason is listed as the treasurer of Sharon with two sinking fund accounts, one for \$10,979.00 and the other had a balance of \$32,500.00. In addition, there was a special fund account with a balance of \$52.00 and an account listed as Town of Sharon containing \$7,036. The grand total of all these accounts was almost \$50,000.00, which could possibly have been enough to keep the bank solvent. The 1926 Examiner's Report is in many ways reminiscent of previous reports, including

the bank examiner's final comments, "bond the bookkeeper at once and get the overdrafts and past due paper resolved."<sup>105</sup>

All of the Examiner's Reports are page after page of columns and numbers that seem to have a way of mesmerizing a reader and 1927 is no different. All of the amounts for the various municipal bonds are listed; as well as, the overdrafts and the large and small loans columns. All of these numbers are relatively the same as in previous years; however, it is the differences that become the most noticeable. For the first time, and the only time in the collection, Planters Bank paid a dividend, the dividend was six percent. The most important section in the 1927 report is found in the examiner's final comments, "Still carrying a large line of past due paper, with losses exceeding amounts shown, in examiner's opinion."<sup>106</sup> It should also be noted that this is the only year that the examiner had an assistant working with him. It appears this bank examiner saw something in 1927 that previous examiners may have overlooked. It could have been the incompetence of the previous examiners or perhaps, since the 1923 through 1926 Examiner's Reports are signed by the same examiner, W. K. Watkins, he was asked to look at certain bank situations more objectively. There could have been dishonesty within the system allowing Hill to play fast and loose with the bank operations and the 1927 examiner finally discovered his house of cards. Whatever the examiner said may very well be the reason that in the next three years Planters Bank would shut its doors forever.

At this point, the incompleteness of this collection became evident as the absence of the 1928 and 1929 Examiner's Reports created a sense of hollowness to the story of

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<sup>105</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1926.

<sup>106</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1927, Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 9, Folder 5, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

Planters Bank. The historical significance of the 1929 Stock Market Crash in October marking the beginning of the Great Depression makes the missing years' Examiner's Reports much more critical to the research and the reasons for the fate of Planters Bank. The only option is to look at the 1930 Examiner's Report, issued only six months before Hill closed Planters Bank's doors, and piece together some semblance of clarity.

The first thing of note worthiness is the list of outside financial institutions that Hill was dealing with. In 1924 this list included nine different outside financial institutions Planters Bank was doing business with; in 1930 every single one of these lines of credit had been closed, with the exception of the Central Hanover Bank & Trust located in Hanover, New York.<sup>107</sup> Hill left two accounts open at the Hanover Bank, both were accounts for \$10,000.00 and each account was secured with almost twice their value in securities. The first note was secured with \$19,651.00 of collateral and the second with \$19,993.00.<sup>108</sup> Although collateral for other accounts is listed, the collateral for Hill's accounts is never fully clarified. At the time of the 1930 Examiner's Report, Hill was in the process of closing down Planters Bank. Unlike many numerous small Southern banks, Planters Bank did not fail because of the 1929 stock market collapse but was systematically shut down by Hill; why he chose to do this is not exactly clear.

Like all the previous years, the 1930 Examiner's Report had over-drafted accounts, but it appears that Hill may have finally gotten them under control. Planters Bank had thirteen over-drafted accounts totaling an unbelievable amount of \$39.00. These accounts ranged anywhere from .50 cents up to \$21.00. In addition to this there are

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<sup>107</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1930, Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 11, Folder 2, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>108</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1930.

three accounts listed as doubtful: the H. C. Good loan for \$6,200.00, as well as two new foreclosures, A. J. Smith for \$5100.00 and a Jim Kennedy for \$2600.00. These three accounts are listed as doubtful and in need of foreclosing. Also, Planters Bank added 250 acres to that which it already owned through the Good foreclosure as well as a previously unknown bank customer named Blair.

Planters Bank seems to have been operating as soundly in 1930 as it did in all the previous years the Examiner's Reports cover, and in fact seems to have been holding steady with a few improvements. As early as 1928 and definitely by 1930, Hill was making money off of foreclosed properties. Through the 1930 Examiner's Report, it can be seen that Hill or rather the foreclosed bank properties showed a profit of \$2,072.00. There can be but just a few ways in which this could have occurred, either he was renting these farms out or he had found tenant farmers or possibly sharecroppers to farm the land. These farms Hill was renting and receiving an income from are not the only examples of him using foreclosed properties to generate income. The tenant house in Hickory Grove was more like an apartment house, the least it could be called would be a multi-tenant rooming establishment that rented by the week or month.<sup>109</sup> Another change that occurred in 1930 was the so called public funds that Planters Bank had on deposit.

The public funds that Planters Bank had on account in 1930 suggests that Planters was growing, not shutting down. On deposit with Planters were the two accounts of W. D. Thomason totaling over \$40,000.00 in addition to two certificates of deposit, for \$14,600.00 and \$41,900.00. In addition to this, the town of Sharon now had two accounts

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<sup>109</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1930.

with a combined value of \$600.00 and there was an account for the York County Construction Fund which was secured with \$40,000.00 worth of York County Bonds. There is nothing contained within the 1930 Examiner's Report that is not out of the ordinary when compared with all the other reports; ,so once again we are left with the bank examiner's final comments.

The general comments regarding the state of Planters Bank were not kind and in a way reflected the status of the bank all along. The condition of the bank was this: the conditions were unsatisfactory because loans were in such a poor state that a fair estimation was not possible. Loans contained "frills and frazzles"<sup>110</sup> which appear worthless. A considerable number of loans were in a frozen status or in part doubtful due to lack of adequate security, and finally, real estate owned was far in excess of true value and unprofitably formed with little or no income to the bank. The Bank needed to adjust by the fall, reducing capital and surplus placing the bank in a more creditable condition or else go into liquidation. It would have been nice to see what the 1928 and 1929 Examiner's Reports would have shown.

In late 1930 for reasons known only to Hill he began closing the doors on Planters Bank. The documents suggest that the most likely reason for starting the bank was to have access to the War Finance Corporation and the federal money they were giving out. The evidence is there in the bank documents; once the War Finance Corporation funds ran out and almost as soon as these loans were repaid, Hill shut the doors to Planters Bank. It is remarkable that during the process of shutting down Planters Bank, Hill made

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<sup>110</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report, Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 11, Folder 2, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.



sure that no bank customer lost any money through the entire process. The reality of the situation is that Hill became the receiver of Planters Bank and its holdings when it went into receivership, and it remained in receivership long after his death.<sup>111</sup> There is also evidence which suggests that, although shut down, Hill may have continued doing business as Planters Bank.<sup>112</sup> (Appendix C) There are several documents dated in the late 1930's and into the mid 1940's on Planters Bank stationary. Since these few documents are all of a business nature and on bank letterhead it suggests that Hill, at least in a few situations, wanted it to appear as if the bank was still operating. Another possible explanation for these few documents could be that Hill was just using up old stationary; however, Hill & Co. mercantile was still a viable enterprise with its own stationary.

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<sup>111</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1930.

<sup>112</sup> State Bank Examiner's Report 1940, Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 13, Folder 1, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

## Building the Town

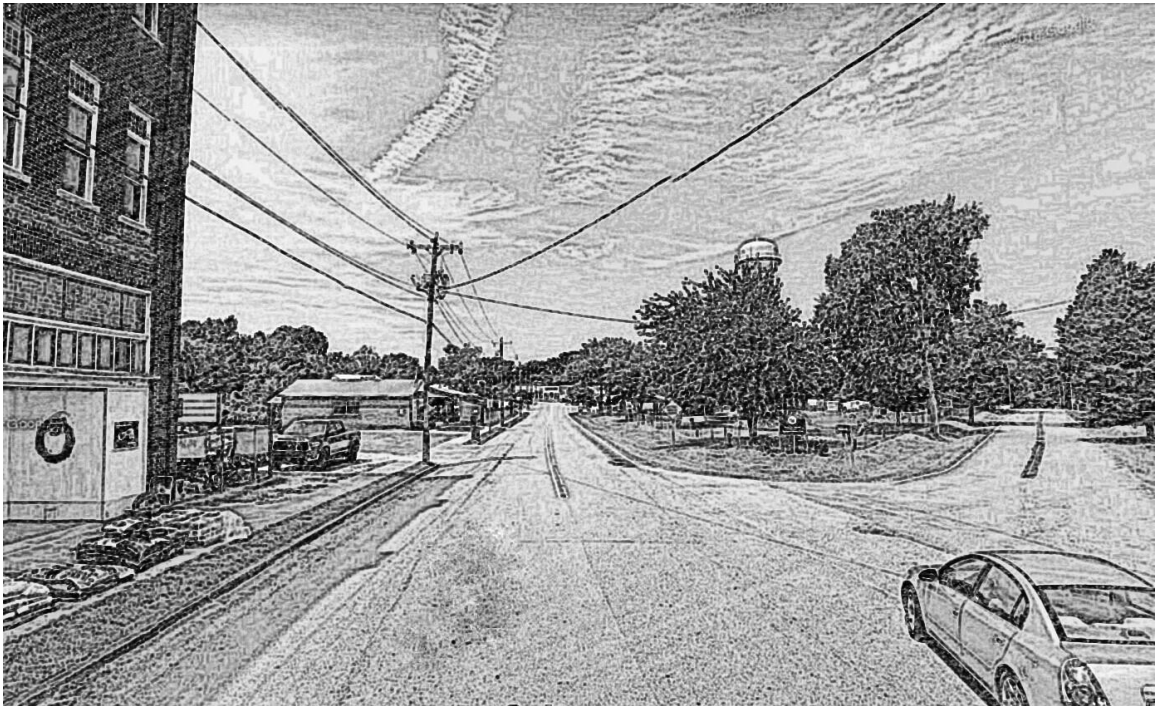
All things good or bad come to an end, including the Hill Store collection. This can create a feeling of exhilaration as well as disappointment. The Hill Store Collection is comprised of ninety boxes containing some 63,000 individual documents sorted and filed into folders, each box containing an average of thirty-five folders. Of these documents approximately eighty percent belong primarily to the Hill & Co. mercantile and Planters Bank. If inclined to, one might say these documents lay out the basic infrastructure of Hill's life. Following this trail of documents is like traveling down the highways and byways of Hill's life, facing every twist and turn in the road ahead. The purpose for taking this trip through the past was to answer two fundamental questions, "What did the War Finance Act have to do with rural southern farming, especially in the Sharon community?" and "What was the South's love of cotton?" In his life-time Hill employed an average of a dozen employees and most likely acquired the knack for knowing their mood just by watching them.<sup>113</sup> As the last few boxes of the collection began telling their part in the journey, a whisper on the wind reminds one that things are never what they appear, conjuring up a possible long ago conversation.

As Hill stares out the large plate glass window of the mercantile, a young employee asks what he was looking at. Reaching across the expanse of time, Hill echoes the same, as one stands staring out the exact same window almost a hundred years later; what do you see? In reply one may respond that they see cars, trees, the people, buildings, street lights, and a myriad of other things. "These are all the same things I am seeing too;

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<sup>113</sup> Ned Borden, "Sharon's mammoth emporium operator says general store has great future," *Evening Herald*, August 1963, York County Library Digital Collections.

look again son, and tell me what you do not see.” might be Hill’s reply. The request may sound baffling but when thought about, it makes perfect sense. The myopic view of the past, distorted by time, can interfere with one’s vision and interpretation of history. As historians, we must always remain vigilant in our interpretation of documents so that our own ethnocentricities, as well as society’s moral values, are not applied to those that lived decades or even centuries ago. Keeping this warning in mind, the best course of action would be to ask the man himself what he does not see.



*A rendition of Mr. Hill's vision of Sharon's future*

In the end, it was as if Hill was indeed leading the way to the answer. The difference in the views, from Hill & Company’s window over the many years, was the infrastructure of Sharon. Hill was adamant about modernizing his business and his community, and like the railroad, this is something Hill and the residents of Sharon had to literally fight for. The things that we take for granted today such as electricity, paved

roads, sidewalks, and the ability to instantly communicate with anyone, anywhere, were only in densely populated cities or did not exist at the turn of the twentieth century. While this seems obvious at first thought, it does make one think about how people traveled and communicated a hundred years ago.

The original inhabitants of the United States consisted of many different, distinct, and independent groups now commonly lumped together under the heading Native Americans. These people used many varied methods of traveling from one place to another, most of which were provided by nature such as, lakes, rivers, and animal trails. Roads and long-distance communication were foreign concepts to Native Americans. European settlers brought the idea of and need for a system of roads with them. Of course, the roads the settlers depended on were nothing more than an area large enough to allow a horse and cart to pass with ease. With repeated use, these wide spots became worn down by wagon wheels, animals, and foot traffic, forming rudimentary roads. This is what existed within the confines of the colonies and were expanded upon as the United States formed and the population grew. Over the course of time a system of wagon roads formed, attempting to link the most populous cities. The most famous is the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road, part of which, ironically, ran through York County, South Carolina, a few miles east of Sharon along today's highway 321. This road linked Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Augusta, Georgia, at times utilizing rivers such as the Catawba and the Savannah to transport goods and people. Eventually, other wagon roads connected to the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road creating a crude road system; the main avenue of transportation until the advent of the steam locomotive in the early part of the

19<sup>th</sup> century. One would tend to think that the arrival of the railroad would have been a boon to merchant planters such as Hill; however this does not appear to be the case.

Tammy Ingram, in her book *Dixie Highway Road Building and the Making of the Modern South*, shows us a very different picture. Ingram does not just tell us about the railroads and how they interacted with the farmer, she tells us just what the state of this country's infrastructure was like in the early years: "by 1811, 37,000 miles of federally funded post roads, including the Cumberland Road...federally funded roads between Athens, Georgia and New Orleans."<sup>114</sup> Ingram informs her readers that, "near mid-century railroad fever eclipsed road building."<sup>115</sup> Ingram suggests that it was not just the average citizen or even the business man driving this railroad fever, "Congress withdrew funding for post roads and began issuing large land grants to any company building lines westward."<sup>116</sup> History shows us the only thing this federal support achieved was its' intended goal, linking the east coast with the west coast, "in 1850 there was 9,021 miles of track laid, by 1900, it was 193,346 miles."<sup>117</sup> It appears that, once the nation was connected the federal governments interest in the railroad ended, leaving the populous in the hands of private enterprises.

Unfortunately, along with progress come pitfalls and Ms. Ingram points out an important change directly affecting the farmer because it, "shifted control over the nation's internal improvements from the federal government to independent railroad

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<sup>114</sup> Tammy Ingram, *Dixie Highway: Road Building and the Making of the Modern South, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.) 19.

<sup>115</sup> Ingram, 19.

<sup>116</sup> Ingram, 19.

<sup>117</sup> Ingram, 20.

companies.”<sup>118</sup> Ingram points out, at least in part, how the railroads treated or prioritized agricultural freight so that “by 1880 the railroads had far exceeded roads...farmers pay the price as railroads charge steep rates for short hauls and cheap rates for long hauls.”<sup>119</sup> Ingram also explains a design failure in how the railroad systems were laid out in a manner friendly to freight shippers but quite detrimental to the farmer: “most railroads linked farms to central depots rather than other market towns leaving farmers few if any alternatives for marketing their crops.”<sup>120</sup> While all of this is rather fascinating to a railroad fanatic how does Ingram’s opinions fit into the accepted historiography?

Le Gette Blythe, in his book, *William Henry Belk Merchant of the South* agrees, at least in part, with Ingram when it comes to the railroad fever analogy, “the old railroads that had fallen to pieces during the war were being restored; new ones were being built and projected.”<sup>121</sup> Two of the major authorities on the New South, Tindall and Woodward are remarkably silent on the significance of infrastructure and only Woodward offers an opinion. Woodward’s stance is in line with Ingram’s and is reflected in the Hill Store Collection, “South eastern railroads were members of a pool that fixed rates and discriminated against agricultural shippers.”<sup>122</sup> Of the four writers, Ingram goes into the most detail concerning the creation of an infrastructure; however, none do a very good job of describing the state of any, or the need for an infrastructure system. For a better look at the need for or concern over an adequate transportation system we can turn to the writings of Brodus Mitchell.

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<sup>118</sup> Ingram, 20.

<sup>119</sup> Ingram, 20.

<sup>120</sup> Ingram, 20.

<sup>121</sup> Blythe, 31.

<sup>122</sup> Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, 187.

In his book, *The Rise of Cotton Mills in the South*, Mitchell does not just discuss the general road conditions that were present in the South, but actually describes the activities carried out by South Carolina, as well as the mindset of those individuals involved. Mitchell begins by showing that as far back as 1850, “there came a renewed interest in industrial matters resulting in an astonishing advance in railroad construction and manufacturing.”<sup>123</sup> This is the consensus view of the South, so Mitchell breaks it down, giving his readers a better understanding of what was transpiring in South Carolina, “in 1856 the South Carolina Legislature condemned a railroad subsidy linking Charleston with Cincinnati; this subsidy is advantageous to only the wealthy gentleman.”<sup>124</sup> Although Mitchell does not list the names of the South Carolina Legislative members, he does expose their mindset at the time, “Charleston’s fate and future are directly linked to the fate and future of all of South Carolina”<sup>125</sup> and that fate should consist of, “developing the resources of her immediate surroundings.”<sup>126</sup> These un-named legislators even went as far as suggesting the methods needed to achieve these goals and the expected results, “cheap modes of transportation, stimulate agriculture...increase the population and wealth of our state.”<sup>127</sup> Mitchell also shows the readers just how far the elected officials in Columbia were willing to go in order to achieve their goals, “In 1886 South Carolina repealed an 1872 act, exempting any state, county, or municipal taxes, for ten years, for any capital investment in cotton, woolen, or

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<sup>123</sup> Broadus Mitchell, *The Rise of Cotton Mills in the South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1921), 43.

<sup>124</sup> Mitchell, 37.

<sup>125</sup> Mitchell, 37.

<sup>126</sup> Mitchell, 37.

<sup>127</sup> Mitchell, 37.

paper mills.”<sup>128</sup> Mitchell also points out another factor associated with infrastructure that is seldom considered, “the cotton mill era in the South was made possible by the railroads pushing their track right up and through the mountains.”<sup>129</sup> These views and changes were great for South Carolina, but how does all this reflect on Hill and his activities?

The first example of how this affected Hill, and more importantly the residents of Sharon is not found in the collection. Many of the local newspapers carried articles concerning freight rate charges and how the railroad was charging what can only be described as a flat rate across the board. In other words, if Hill wished to ship, or receive freight, to and from Charleston, South Carolina, he would pay the same rates as someone doing the same thing in Cincinnati, Ohio or Chicago, Illinois, or where ever the Three C’s railroad serviced. To fully understand the unfavorable repercussions of this monopolizing practice, all that Hill invested in the railroad must be taken into account, because of its potential advantages. Documents within the Hill Store Collection show he paid, out of his own pocket, for the Sharon railroad spur to come all the way to his mercantile and not stop at the depot.<sup>130</sup> The collection does contain documents where Hill sued the railroad over a warehouse fire, which shows that he was not afraid of the railroads or the power they wielded.<sup>131</sup> The amount of goods he would bring into the Sharon area via this railroad spur made it a worthy investment towards his future success. While interviewing a past employee, Herschel Brown, Sr., it was revealed, and later confirmed through Hill

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<sup>128</sup> Mitchell, 76.

<sup>129</sup> Mitchell, 185.

<sup>130</sup> Bryan, “Leading Citizen of Sharon Has Been Factor In Development of Western Portion of County.”

<sup>131</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 11, Folder 14, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.



& Co. documents, that Hill did not just order entire rail cars full of merchandise for his store, but at times brought in an entire train load of one particular product.<sup>132</sup> Brownie, as he insists on being called, often related stories of entire cars or trains full of fertilizer, coal, and believe it or not, even flour. Oral interviews yield the best information when care is taken not to push the interviewee, possibly soliciting painful or traumatic events, but to give them time to allow memories to surface and to verbalize their experiences as only they can. Brownie would pause for an extra few seconds after certain questions with a noticeably slight smile or grin forming as distant memories are brought to the surface. He conveyed many fond remembrances concerning these types of freight shipments and other such activities. Brownie tells of times when his job was to unload car after car of coal and going home as black as the ace of spades, or as white as “Casper the Friendly Ghost” when the freight cars held flour or fertilizer.<sup>133</sup> Although he is well past ninety, memory problems during the interview were never an issue as Brownie never missed an opportunity to correct or clarify anything, and everything, he related, in case of any later confusion on the part of the interviewer. One can tell that Hill held a place of special significance for Brownie. In fact, Brownie credits his experiences with Hill as the sole reason he started his dry cleaning business after returning from World War II. It can only be imagined how Hill felt about his employees in general, let alone any one specific employee. Walks down memory lane can leave one to wonder about the kind of stories Hill would tell. With nostalgia blurring Sharon in the rearview mirror, it seemed Hill

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<sup>132</sup> Herschel Brown, Sr. (former Hill & Co. employee), interviewed by Paul Laffredo III, Sharon, South Carolina, 22 April 2017.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

whispered, “Maybe I will tell you the story of how I brought electricity to Sharon next time we talk.”

The Hill Store Collection contains a series of letters between Hill and the Southern Power Company, beginning on 2 January 1925 and spanning almost a year, with the last document dated 3 November 1925. These letters peak the curiosity since Hill is not the mayor or a member of the town council, therefore, he should not be personally involved with Southern Power Company in the process of electrifying Sharon, beyond that of a concerned citizen and business owner. The first two letters are addressed to a Mr. J. W. Fox in the care of Southern Power Company, Charlotte, North Carolina. The bottom-line of these two letters is, as emphasized in the letter of 2 January, “that the good folks of Sharon would like for you to provide electric service to our town.”<sup>134</sup> The second letter, dated the 26<sup>th</sup> of January, suggests that Southern Power might be giving the residents of Sharon the run around, “...made a trip to Charlotte some ten days ago to see you, but you were out of town, and we have been unable to reach you by telephone.”<sup>135</sup> In the next communiqué on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May, Hill no longer addresses Mr. Fox, but a Mr. Marshall, president of Southern Public Utilities. This change suggests that Hill and the Sharon residents were, in fact, being given the run around and got tired of it; thereby, going over Mr. Fox’s head straight to the president.

The town of Hickory Grove joined Sharon with its own request for power; another indication that they [townsfolk] were being brushed off by Southern Public Utilities. One would think that with two towns now asking for power, Southern Public

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<sup>134</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 13, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

Utilities would have been eager to respond; however, it appears that both towns were being put off as, “we were asked to wait until the outcome of the election in York was decided.”<sup>136</sup> This particular letter, in the last few lines, appears to show a sense of resignation as it closes out, “we would like to get in line for power as soon as possible ...kindly advise me ...in this regard.”<sup>137</sup> The very last remark also hints at the possibility that this was Hill’s fight as it ended with, “advise me,”<sup>138</sup> not “advise us.” The letter dated 1 June, at first suggests that maybe power was coming to Sharon. This letter shows Southern Power apparently sent an engineer to Sharon but, unfortunately, Hill was not in town that day and that, “our people are very anxious to know what you have decided about furnishing our town with electricity.”<sup>139</sup> Hill has been trying to get power to Sharon for the past six months with no apparent headway and it would not be until the letter dated the 24<sup>th</sup> of August, that the reason for the delay by Southern Public Utilities to provide its services to the towns of Sharon and Hickory Grove, “the hard surface road out here from York is assured...contract to be let Sept.1<sup>st</sup>.”<sup>140</sup> In Hill’s 3 November 1925 letter, he submitted the state highway engineer’s plans for the paved road to Southern Public Utilities. It took him over a year to get electrical power to his town and it seems the only stumbling block was a paved road. This seems to be the end of the road, problem solved. In Hill’s mind, no paved roads means no electricity: his solution was to pave the road. Life is not so simple and it is not difficult to imagine the look of disappointment on Hill’s face. It matters little what era in time you choose to look at since the advent of

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

electricity: rural country roads, dirt or gravel, lined with miles of electric wires swaying in the breeze was as common a sight then as now. It seems the lack of a paved road was a convenient excuse for not providing power to Sharon, so what is the link between paved roads and electricity?

In trying to completely understand the bigger picture as Hill would have wanted to and why it was so difficult for Sharon to receive electrical services, it helps to go back to the source. In the 1920s, Southern Power Company was the only one in York County, South Carolina, providing electricity to area industries. Starting out in 1904 as Catawba Power Company, Southern Power Company was formed by James B. Duke, a tobacco tycoon who bankrolled an energy company.<sup>141</sup> Duke and his partner, Dr. Walker G. Wylie, began this endeavor in 1904 in Charlotte, North Carolina, harnessing the Catawba and Wateree rivers with dams from Bridgewater, North Carolina all the way to Camden, South Carolina.<sup>142</sup> Southern Power Company would eventually become Duke Energy Company, one of the largest providers of electricity in the United States today. The question of availability of services appears to be far from the issue. In fact, Tindall research establishes how available electricity was, “By 1925 ten hydroelectric stations had a total capacity of 483,000 horsepower...supplied energy for 300 cotton mills as well as towns and cities of the Piedmont Carolinas.”<sup>143</sup> Tindall goes further to inform his readers that by 1927, “half of all southern industries had been electrified...in the Carolinas electricity powered about ninety percent of the cotton and tobacco industries

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<sup>141</sup> Jonathan Murray, “Duke Power Company,” *NorthCarolinahistory.org: An Online Encyclopedia*, Accessed 3 April 2018, <http://northcarolinahistory.org>.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Tindall, 72.

and fifty percent of the furniture and knitting mills.”<sup>144</sup> As though giving a final end to the lack of availability theory, Tindal notes that, “By 1930 ...a capacity of 695,000 horsepower made Duke Power the largest operating company in the South...producing more energy than all the slaves of the Old South.”<sup>145</sup>

Joe Maynor, in his book, *Duke Power the First 75 Years*, explains exactly what was going on with Duke Power’s reluctance to electrify towns and why the company took that position. Maynor describes the mindset of Mr. Duke and his power company, as applied to Sharon and the Piedmont area. Maynor notes that in a special edition of the *Charlotte Observer*, dated 26 April 1937, James B. Duke, “describes the turn of the century Piedmont as an agricultural section and not a particularly favored agricultural section at that...a small scattering of small industrial plants...the incomes and purchasing power of our people are naturally limited.”<sup>146</sup> Maynor is trying to convey that, according to Duke, there was insufficient return on his investment; in other words, there was not enough of an individual consumer market to meet Duke Power’s bottom line. Maynor tells us that, “the original idea was to supply electricity for industry only...Duke found themselves in the business of supplying power to a growing number of residential homes...this was not the idea at all.”<sup>147</sup> It appears that Mr. Duke was forced into creating a residential consumer division because of the very industries he had intended on providing power to. Whether out of altruistic means or as a method of attracting employees, Duke Power’s textile industry customers insisted that the company also

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<sup>144</sup> Tindall, 75.

<sup>145</sup> Tindall, 75.

<sup>146</sup> Joe Maynor, *Duke Power the First 75 Years*, (Albany, New York: Delmar, 1980), 30.

<sup>147</sup> Maynor, 30.

provide power to homes in the mill villages that were springing up around the cotton mills. This newly discovered fact goes a long way in establishing that the initial “no paved road” excuse was just that, an excuse. Hill and the Hill Store Collection remind us that included in the infra-structure picture are not just railroads and electricity but also contains the telephone and the system of roads that existed.

Although the documents do not specify an exact date, Hill & Co. mercantile was home to Sharon’s first telephone exchange. While the Hill Store Collection does not show any evidence pertaining to individual or residential telephone services, there is ample evidence of a telephone service operating within Hill & Co. The Hill Store Collection contains numerous hand-written documents with information regarding phone calls made from within the mercantile. Most of the documents have the name of the individual placing the call, where the call was being made to, as well as how much Hill charged the person for the call. Telephone call charges were regulated and would have been listed in a rate booklet; however, Hill would also have been entitled to add a surcharge to cover any expenses Hill & Co. may have incurred to provide phone service to the general public.

In researching Hill’s connection with telephone services, the conversation has a strikingly familiar ring to it, pardon the pun. A current employee of Comporium Communications, located in Rock Hill, South Carolina, tells a similar story. In the 1890s there was an automobile company in Rock Hill called Anderson Buggy Works. Mr. Anderson made a request of Southern Bell to have a line run from the local railroad depot to his factory. As one might have guessed, Southern Bell refused, and in the end, Mr.

Anderson ran the line himself. Over time this one telephone line was expanded upon, sold off to Mr. E. L. Barnes and family, eventually becoming Comporium Communications.<sup>148</sup> The similarities between the residents of Rock Hill wanting the telephone and Sharon's request for electricity makes one believe that all small, southern towns had an uphill battle for infrastructure. Also, Hill having the telephone exchange in the mercantile makes one wonder why, with all of the business ventures and ideas he pursued, why did he not pursue the telephone further, developing it into one of the many independent communication companies currently in existence today?

In the United States today, because all cities and towns have electricity and communications systems, infrastructure usually means only one thing to most individuals, roads. One would think that a movement to secure better roads would have started with Henry Ford and his ability to mass produce the automobile. But cars were not the catalyst to better roads, the bicycle started it. The push for better roads began in the 1890s with bicyclists who wished to ride through the scenic country side complaining about the poor conditions of rural roads. In order to understand their need, one must first be able to visualize just what was being fought over.

The first thing that Hill, or rather the collection, points out concerning roads is exactly what highway maintenance consisted of on the rural level. Contained within the Planters Bank documents are more than a half dozen payroll ledgers for road maintenance.<sup>149</sup> These documents are dated 1925 and cover road maintenance in January and February as well as August and September with an undated payroll request for a private road. It

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<sup>148</sup> Clarence E. Horton Jr., *The Comporium Story*, (Charlotte, NC: Jostens, 2007), 25.

<sup>149</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 8, Folder 1, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

appears that county road work was down in the spring and fall. There are two classifications of workers listed on the ledgers: shovel hands, and teams and drivers. If you happened to be a shovel hand you were paid a dollar a day: if you provided a wagon and a team of horses you were paid three dollars a day. Across the span of these payroll requests are the same family names and often the same individuals: Bankheads, Ratchfords, Cranfords, as well as a few others. At times, these names are listed as foreman such as the case of Bankhead or Kirkpatrick; however, the daily salaries do not change. While not all of the documents state where the work occurred, one does specify the maintenance was for state highway 91 as it traversed the Bullock Creek Township in York County. An example of this data is, “top-soiling road in Bullock Creek Township from state highway to Chester County line.”<sup>150</sup> At the bottom of this document is the total cost, \$179.25.

Ingram’s *Dixie Highway* provides a look at exactly what was transpiring in these early years, “Before local and state laws were passed to put convicts to work on public roads, many southern counties relied upon statute labor laws.”<sup>151</sup> Ingram also notes that because of many factors, such as income disparity and population densities the northern states had more money for road improvements whereas, “southern states had to rely on property taxes, forced labor, and occasional local bond issues to finance all road work.”<sup>152</sup> Road maintenance in the early 1900s consisted of a wagon full of clay and men

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<sup>150</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 9, Folder 1, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>151</sup> Ingram, 16.

<sup>152</sup> Ingram, 17.



walking down the road filling in holes with the clay. Another wagon would follow with topsoil which was then spread over the road surface.

Hill most assuredly knew the value of a solid infrastructure because there are documents spanning almost fifteen years, all dealing with internal improvements. In 1923, Hill was involved in the bond issue which provided the resources for the construction of a road from the North Carolina line to the town of Fort Mill, South Carolina. He also brokered two bond issues, one for Beaufort County, South Carolina and the other for Horry County, South Carolina. Both bond packages were bought by Sidney Spitzer & Co. out of Toledo, Ohio in 1923. The Beaufort bond issue was for the building of bridges and the Horry County bond for highway construction. Hill spearheaded the Sharon Electric Light Bond, an attempt to bring electric lighting to the Sharon community. Correspondence between the South Carolina State Highway Department in Columbia, South Carolina and Planters Bank show that Hill was involved in bond issues for everything from drainage to bridges mostly located in York County, South Carolina. Documents in the Hill Store Collection show that in 1929, he corresponded with a Dr. I. J. Campbell, a Senator in Columbia, South Carolina. The issue of major concern was the Broad River and Bullocks Creek bonds, both concerned with road maintenance. As late as 1938, Hill was still involving himself in local bond issues aimed at improving York County's infrastructure. Also, contained within the Hill Store Collection is a bid award for where Hill, on behalf of Hill & Co., submitted, and had accepted a proposal to provide the materials needed to install sidewalks in York, South Carolina.<sup>153</sup> In addition

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<sup>153</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 12, Folder 6, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

to the York project, Hill was also tried to get sidewalks in Sharon. According to an article in the *Yorkville Enquirer*, he wanted sidewalks that ran from the Woodlawn Presbyterian Church all the way to the Hill & Co. mercantile.<sup>154</sup>

Although not directly reflected in the Hill Store Collection, there are three main points or ideas Ingram expresses throughout her book that relevant to this study. For example, although the desire for better roads was started by bicycle enthusiasts it was the automobile that drove the desire home. Also, in the beginning there was no equipment designed specifically for road construction and maintenance. Finally, the absolute authority on anything associated with roads was in the hands of local county commissioners. The last fact is elaborated on in great lengths by Ingram in order to show the lack of co-operation between counties across the various states as well as the level of corruption that sometimes existed on the county level. Ingram notes that, the Dixie Highway was begun in 1915 and was not finished until 1926, running from Lake Michigan all the way to Miami Beach.<sup>155</sup> More importantly she describes what this early highway consisted of, the route was, “made up of hundreds of short, rough, local roads stitched together in a continuous route.”<sup>156</sup> One needs to remember that this is the early days of the automobile and all the things commonly associated with motor cars does not yet exist. Once the proposed route was revealed a frenzy of graft and corruption erupted. From the state level all the way down to the county level there were businessmen, investors, realtors, and the general public all wanting in on the potential profit this route

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<sup>154</sup> “News About Sharon,” *Yorkville Enquirer*, 26 August 1919, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <[http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1919-08-26/ed - 1/seq-1/](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026925/1919-08-26/ed-1/seq-1/)>.

<sup>155</sup> Ingram, 1.

<sup>156</sup> Ingram, 1.

represented. In addition to this, there were areas along the route but not necessarily part of the route that tried through both legal and nefarious methods of getting the proposed route changed. The incentive for this feeding frenzy of activity was of course money. During this time there were no roadside hotels or motels along the sides of the highway because there were no actual highways. All the traveling amenities that exist today had not been thought of; there were no fast food restaurants, scenic overlooks, historic sites, or even state parks. All of this had yet to come into existence, the tourist dollar had not attached itself to road development. The way most southern states were able to deal with their road and their road projects was to delegate the authority to local county road commissioners. Suddenly, men who had never been noticed or recognized in any fashion had real leverage with everyone, even the governor. In such a system, corruption is bound to exist.

Discovering Hill's commitment to building Sharon's infrastructure, not just for his own needs but for all of Sharon, gives new meaning to community service. Hill wanted success for himself and his community, which makes one wonder, why they continued with a failing product, what was the South's love of cotton? Contained within this collection are numerous examples pertaining to the futility of cotton farming. One example of this futility can be seen in a document dated 17 February 1925. This particular missive is from Planters Bank and is addressed to a Mr. Smith & Smith, of Hickory Grove, South Carolina.<sup>157</sup> In this letter Planters Bank informed the Smith brothers that all three of their accounts were overdrawn. The three accounts in question

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<sup>157</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 7, Folder 2, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

were their store account, overdrawn by \$150.08, their personal account, overdrawn by \$19.62, and finally their cotton account, overdrawn by \$339.57. These amounts may not seem like very much money; however, if converted into today's monetary values, these amounts would be comparable to tens of thousands of credit card debt. It may be possible for a farmer to overcome a single year's bad harvest; however, overcoming this debt year after year was not. With the collapse of the cotton market in the early 1920's and the Boll Weevil infestation, which soon followed, the futility of cotton farming becomes obvious. With no real definitive answer to the cotton question found so far the research continues, hoping that somewhere in this collection are the documents needed.

## **Cotton and Other Endeavors**

No investigation is complete nor can any assessment of a life be made without examining every facet of the man. Although the majority of the Hill Store Collection is concerning the mercantile and bank, approximately twenty percent of the collection is not associated with either one. Hill engaged in several other business endeavors which included two cotton gins, one in Sharon and the other in Bullocks Creek, a cotton warehouse, the state cotton warehouse system, a grist mill, a John Deere dealership, two car dealerships, Chevrolet & Ford, and a service station. The documentation concerning each of these ventures is sparse; therefore no solid conclusions can be reached regarding Hill's intent, success, or failure concerning them, but there are enough documents remaining to allow one to make certain conclusions.

The documents contained in this collection are invaluable when it comes to interpreting the life and times of Hill; however, eyewitness testimony, as found in the Herschel Brown, Sr. interview, can be even more enlightening. It seems the least important of Hill's enterprises was the grist mill. A grist mill is where wheat or corn is ground into flour and, according to Brownie, was just a small one-man operation, "this was a very small or infrequent task when compared to grinding the coffee which was a daily task."<sup>158</sup> While conducting the interview with Brownie it seemed that the grist mill was more of a service offered by Hill, rather than an everyday task like grinding coffee. The fact that the grist mill was nothing more than a service is supported by the mercantile documents which show that Hill bought flour by the barrel on a regular basis and at times

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<sup>158</sup> Herschel Brown, Sr. (former Hill & Co. employee), interviewed by Paul Laffredo III, Sharon, South Carolina, 22 April 2017.

even purchased entire railroad cars of flour. Along with large purchases of flour Hill also purchased [sacs] by the hundreds: a little detective work through the mercantile records was needed to ascertain the purpose of the sacs. When realizing the sacs were also being used when coffee was purchased, it is not hard to imagine what was transpiring over at the mercantile. Whether it was coffee or flour, a customer would come into the store and purchase a said amount of flour or coffee and this amount was placed into one of the sacs then handed over to the customer. There are numerous examples of the Hill & Co. purchasing flour from several different vendors suggesting the grist mill was not used for grinding wheat; however, throughout the customer records corn meal does not appear to be a product sold in the mercantile.

The lack of corn meal on the shelves as a commercial product seems odd when one considers the geographical location of Sharon, South Carolina. Sharon could be the model for Southern living, and after residing in the South for near thirty years, it became apparent that Southerners love to eat two things, grits and corn bread. All documentation leads to the assumption that the grist mill was predominantly used to make corn meal and possibly to manufacture chicken feed. Since most of Hill's customers were farmers or associated with farming it is not out of the realm of possibilities that many of them raised chickens. This hypothesis was verified by records spanning years that shows that Hill engaged in cottage industries on the local level by buying local eggs and produce. The chicken is one of those animals which provide farmers both food and income. When the chickens are fully grown, and capable of laying eggs, the farmer can consume what they need as well as selling off the excess. If the farmer is smart he will allow some of the

eggs to be hatched replenishing his stock and keeping his egg business flowing. During this process the young chicks, called biddies are not capable of foraging for food so the farmer uses ground corn to feed them until they are capable of finding food on their own. Since the Hill Store Collection does not provide any documents concerning the grist mill we are left with looking at what is not there and Brownie's memories to draw a conclusion.

There are actually three business ventures that Hill engaged in that left limited documentation concerning their operation; the two automobile dealerships and the service station. As the three businesses were managed more so by William L. Hill, Jr., hereafter referred to as Bill Jr., one can understand the absence of any substantial documentation. The only documents that remain concerning the service station are the carbon copies of the credit slips where Bill Jr. charged his gasoline purchases. Unfortunately, other than the cost of gasoline or the frequency of Bill Jr.'s purchases there is little else to be gleaned from those documents. With the scarcity of documents on hand concerning the service station, this examination must move on to the car dealerships.

There are no documents within this collection that refer to a Chevrolet dealership; however, there are a scant few that relate to the Ford dealership. They all appear to be automobile purchase invoices and service invoices. As these invoices were examined it appeared that Ford was having problems with the engines in their late model 1920's Ford pick-up trucks. Further research into this situation was called for. Since these were farm trucks, it could be the abuse they were put through that caused the engine failures or perhaps these trucks were being used for something other than their intended use; if so,

just what were these farm trucks being used for? Ingram's book, *Dixie Highway* verifies exactly what they were used for, "Masters of ingenuity, farmers put their new automobiles to work hauling crops to market and pulling plows...used the cars' engines to power cotton gins, corn shellers...to electrify their homes and barns."<sup>159</sup> Is it possible that this is what was happening in Sharon, South Carolina that resulted in what appears to be an unusual number of blown engines? This possibility was brought up during the oral interview with Brownie, and his response was disappointing, "I'm not aware of anyone around here doing that."<sup>160</sup> Without any confirmation of misuse, an inquiry concerning the unusual number of blown engines, was made to the Ford museum in Michigan where the most probable answer was discovered. The answer was just as disappointing as the one Brownie gave. The museum reported that, "there is a known defect in the cooling systems on certain makes and models of cars and trucks during the twenties. These defects were corrected and the problem ceased."<sup>161</sup> During the interview, Brownie was asked the location of Hill's car dealerships, and the answer was unexpected: Brownie remembered that "he had them displayed on the first floor of the mercantile, one on each side."<sup>162</sup> It appears that the Hill & Co. mercantile was a one stop shop for all your home, farm, and transportation needs.

While there is little known regarding the automobile dealerships, there is more documentation for the John Deere dealership Hill operated. Spread throughout the mercantile records are numerous examples of Hill either selling or ordering plow points,

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<sup>159</sup> Ingram, 32.

<sup>160</sup> Herschel Brown, Sr. (former Hill & Co. employee), interviewed by Paul Laffredo III, Sharon, South Carolina, 22 April 2017.

<sup>161</sup> Linda Skolarus, E-Mail message to the Henry Ford Research Center, 18 February 2018.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.



in various sizes.<sup>163</sup> There are ample examples of him selling what appears to be accessories for John Deere farm equipment; unfortunately. There is nothing to indicate the sale of John Deere tractors. Of the twenty percent of the Hill Store Collection not associated with the mercantile and Planters Bank, approximately two thirds of those documents pertain to cotton and its harvest, which is, or rather was, a large part of Hill's main concerns each and every fall.



*Hill & Co. cotton gin*

Contained within the records are several large as well as small cotton ledgers of receipts for all of Hill's cotton purchases. The term cotton purchases is rather misleading as the actual cotton may not have been purchased but rather stored for future sales. This may sound confusing; however, when the entire process is understood it becomes very clear. When harvesting cotton there are actually three different products brought to market, and the selling of these three commodities is reflected in the ledgers. The three products harvested are, first and foremost, the cotton fibers themselves, the cotton seed,

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<sup>163</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 1, Folder 5, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

and the cotton hulls. As the cotton is ginned the seeds and hulls are separated from the fibers, and the cotton fibers are then graded. The two most common grades of cotton grown in the York County, South Carolina area, as shown by the ledger books, are long staple cotton and midland grade cotton. The seeds and the hulls are separated as they each have monetary value. The seeds were either kept for the next year's planting or sold off. The majority of the seeds that were sold off eventually became cotton seed oil which was used in a similar fashion as sunflower or peanut oil and is commonly found in mayonnaise and other salad dressing type products.<sup>164</sup> The hulls were sold off as a protein supplement for livestock feed.<sup>165</sup> When looking at the ledgers it is very easy to identify all the pertinent information, the only problem becomes reading the handwriting of whoever filled out the cotton ticket. As one might expect, the name of the cotton farmer is on the ticket along with the gross weight of the cotton bale being sold; the average weight on a bale of cotton was around 500 pounds. The cost of ginning the cotton, the final weight of the ginned bale as well as the status of the seed is also recorded on the cotton ticket. Regardless of whether the farmer sold his cotton seed or kept it for the next year, it was recorded, either by the price paid for the seed, by weight, by notation, or seed returned. This ticket also reflects the price paid for the ginned cotton itself. Hill had two cotton gins, one located across the street from the mercantile and one located in Bullocks Creek. The one thing that these ledgers do not record is which gin the cotton was ginned at. To be fair to Hill and the citizens of Sharon it should be noted that Hill did not have a monopoly on cotton ginning as there was another gin located in Sharon, the Rainey Gin.

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<sup>164</sup> V. Heuzé, et al, "Cottonseed Hulls," Feedipedia, a programme by INRA, CIRAD AFZ and FAO, Accessed 5 February 2018, <https://www.feedipedia.org/node/743>.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

This gin, although much smaller than Hill's, would have been in direct competition with him, as was other cotton gins in the county. In 1921, the South Carolina Cotton Growers Co-operative began holding meetings throughout the state encouraging all members to sign their cooperative marketing contract.<sup>166</sup> Hill, believing in the success of everyone through cooperation, was all for cotton co-operative marketing to benefit the farmers, ginner, and the buyers. Hill felt so strongly in co-operative farming practices and methods that after his election to the co-op board, he remained a member for many years. Once the cotton was ginned it was either sold off or stored which is where the cotton warehouse system entered the bigger picture.

Cotton is a commodity like no other in that it appears to have a very long shelf life as demonstrated by the cotton warehouse system. Cotton is harvested in the fall and the speed in which a farmer is able to bring his crop to market is the only advantage or disadvantage one farmer may have over the next. If, for whatever reason, one were to plant late, then your harvest would also be late. There could have been weather related delays. Possibly it was too wet to plant or a drought caused a harvest delay. The bottom line appears to be that, prior to the cotton warehouse system, he who brought his crop to harvest the quickest made the most money. The longer it took to bring the crop to market the more flooded that market would be, consequently lowering the profits. The cotton warehouse system was a means by which all the farmers received a fair market value for their cotton, and at the same time prevented the cotton market from being inundated with too much cotton. thereby drastically lowering its potential value. In its basic form the

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<sup>166</sup> Bryan, "Leading Citizen of Sharon Has Been Factor In Development of Western Portion of County."

cotton warehouse system seems initially to be in the best interests of the farmer; but closer examination suggests otherwise.

The way the warehouse system worked mostly benefitted Hill as it added more money directly into his coffers. Farmers brought their cotton to him at harvest time. A portion of each farmer's cotton was ginned, and then sold off. The remainder of that farmer's crop was ginned and placed into a warehouse, in this case it was cotton warehouse #11 owned by Hill. By selling a portion of the crop the farmer made enough money to stay alive and, by placing the rest in storage, they had future income secured for when the cotton prices rebounded. In effect, the cotton warehouse system was a system of storage set up to slowly release product throughout the year in an attempt to ensure a steady price. Exactly to what extent, beyond the community of Sharon, Hill played in setting up this system on the state wide level may never be known; however, as far as Sharon is concerned he was the man behind it all. The cotton gin as well as the cotton warehouse still stand; they are on the opposite side of the street from the Hill & Co. building. Although the warehouse has been repurposed, the gin, according to its current owner, is still intact and operational; all that is needed is for someone to flip the power switch on.

Although the warehouse system did afford the individual farmer a better price for his cotton throughout the year, all it appears to have done in the end was add another bill to pay, putting more money in someone else's pocket. As most farm products go, there is a certain percentage of the crop that will spoil between the time it takes to harvest and the time it takes to bring the product to market. Given the already established conditions of

the infra-structure and the potential delays caused by such problems, the time to market could be even longer, causing even more spoilage. The question then becomes, who is going to have to absorb those losses, the farmer, the shipper, or the buyer? Until a farmer's crop is actually bought by a merchant the farmer is the owner of the crop and ultimately assumes any and all losses. This is not the case with cotton; it appears that cotton has no shelf life, if properly stored. The cost of storing the cotton became the responsibility of the farmers. This system may seem like a good idea for the farmers-- sell a little, store a little, and just like a nice fat savings account they could go and withdraw what they needed to. Although the storage fees for the stored bales of cotton were minimal, only Hill saw any profit from this system.

The mercantile documents contain many individual records recording what items were purchased during each and every customer visit. The earliest of these records are circa 1918 and the last one is in the 1970's. Many of these customer records from the 1920's throughout the 1930's show the futility of cotton farming regardless of the price paid at harvest time or at some later date. Some of these records show families with three separate accounts; a household account, a farm account, and a cotton account, and most of those accounts are in arrears. It appears that Hill had no hesitation in affording credit as long as his cotton warehouse was full. Hill also paid strict attention to the price of cotton along with who owed him what. When the price of cotton had rebounded enough, at least to Hill's satisfaction, his customers were promptly informed. There are numerous letters between Hill and his customers telling the customer they had reached the limits of his generosity and they needed to bring him a bale of cotton immediately so it could be

applied to their debt. At times these individual missives were much more detailed noting that the debt was so large that the bale or bales of cotton requested had to weigh a specific amount in order to bring the debt back in line. This practice was going on before, during, and after the life of Planters Bank. These notifications over the amount of debt being carried by the farmers suggests that the debt was not easily addressed, as there are records that span years showing the debt increasing. The one thing that is crucial to the research is to not place today's values on past events. Although these records only reflect debts totaling in the hundreds of dollars for these farmers, that was an insurmountable amount of debt, and more than one farmer went broke. If one were to try to compare that experience to today's reality it could only be described as having tens of thousands of dollars in credit card debt and a minimum wage job. Once again, the realities of an earlier statement ring true; for every dollar generated by the local residents of Sharon and the surrounding community, Hill got a piece of each and every one. As this small but important part of the Hill Store Collection is fully evaluated an answer to the question, "what was the South's love of cotton?" is finally satisfied. Cotton was and is the only shelf-stable crop that could be grown in abundance without anyone suffering any losses due to spoilage, and until the infra-structure in the South caught up to the level of that in the northern states, the economics of growing anything else was simply not cost effective. Having finally found the answers to the questions that generated this research to begin with we are left with just one unfinished task. That task is to answer one final question, one that was not asked or even considered in the very beginning of this project. This question, although sounding simple enough is: who was Hill and on which side of the

historiographical fence will we find him? Will he be a member of the Tindall camp and believe that the South is still in the hands of the ante-bellum merchant/planter class mentality, or is he more in line with the C. Vann Woodward profile of a new breed of merchant/ entrepreneur?

### **The Man Himself**

One of the things that might be said about Hill is that he was forever looking at ways to increase the marketability of Sharon and its' surrounding residents. In 1929, as the world went about its' merry way oblivious to the impending economic disaster, Hill, as if guided by premonition, was busy looking towards the future, both his and that of his neighbors'. With the determination of a man who appears to have a master plan, he began looking into purchasing sheep. The first indication of this endeavor is a document dated 30 April 1929 from J. D. Hambright of Sharon, South Carolina to a Mr. W. W. Rhame of nearby Ridgeville, South Carolina.<sup>167</sup> This is the same Hambright who was Vice President of Planters Bank and may have been Hill's closest friend and confidant. At first this missive seems out of place and not tied to Hill at all; however, as more similar letters in the Hill Store Collection were located its value became apparent. In this letter Hambright discussed the purchase of an automatic sheep shearing machine with Mr. Rhame for which he offered ten dollars, conditioned on the inclusion all of the blades for the machine. Within a week's time, the 6<sup>th</sup> of May to be exact, Hill was in communication with a Mr. G. F. Buford of Clinton, South Carolina, wondering if Mr. Buford was willing to sell his flock in part, as he did not know if he wanted the flock in full.<sup>168</sup> The subconscious has already concluded what the conscious mind verbalizes, 'what are the two of you up now, what is your angle Mr. Hill and how does J. D. Hambright fit into all of this?'

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<sup>167</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 11, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>168</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 13, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.



The documentation which links these two men together comes in June of 1929 when J. D. Hambright inquired as to the particulars of a specific type of ewe, the Hampshire ewes that he had heard were for sale. This first letter asking about the availability of ewes was addressed to a Mr. E. L. Corley of Saluda, South Carolina and was dated 20 June 1929.<sup>169</sup> There is also another inquiry dated the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June, addressed to a Mr. C. L. Murray of Holly Hill, South Carolina inquiring about the ewes he had advertised in the Weekly Market Bulletin.<sup>170</sup> On the 26<sup>th</sup> of June, a mere four days after Hambright's inquiry, Hill was in contact with Mr. Murray in regards to the same flock of ewes.<sup>171</sup> In the letter, Hill informed Mr. Murray that his flock of twenty sheep was not worth the cost of the freight he would have to pay in order to get them to his farm; he envisioned purchasing a much larger amount, "if could get a car on about 150 head the freight would be considerably cheaper."<sup>172</sup> In August of 1929, the search for Hampshire Ewes was broadened and now included Marino Sheep.<sup>173</sup> Also, Hill expanded his search for these two specific animals to as far away as Smithfield, Texas<sup>174</sup> while making inquiries to the Agricultural Extension Services at Clemson University.<sup>175</sup> Showing the great lengths that Hill went to in order to acquire these animals are four letters, three

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<sup>169</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 11, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 13, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 11, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>175</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 13, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

dated 6 September 1929<sup>176</sup> and the last dated the 9<sup>th</sup> of September, all referring to Hill going as far as Virginia and Kentucky in order to gather his flock.<sup>177</sup>

“What are you up to now Mr. Hill?” is a resounding question that pops up quite often when evaluating the Hill Store Collection, and although something may appear obvious, it seldom is. At first glance it could be assumed that Hill and Hambright were simply trying to introduce these breeds of livestock into the area. The conundrum begins when one looks closely at the breeds of animals these two men were trying to purchase. In Hill’s day a person might have to go to a public library and consult an encyclopedia; however, in this day and age a quick Google search will reveal the significance of these two specific breeds. The Hampshire sheep produces anywhere from six to ten pounds of high quality fleece per sheep and the Marino or Merino (it can be spelled both ways), provides up to forty pounds of the softest wool available. These facts, combined with the already well-established cotton industry in the area, confirm that Hill and Hambright were attempting to make another commodity available to the local mills. By making both wool and fleece available to the local mills whereby they could produce cotton/wool blends. In a way this is fairly ingenious; if Hill could increase the need or demand for cotton in order to create these blended materials, the effects would ripple throughout the industry. The farmer would be able to sell more cotton outright, thereby storing less of his harvest and saving on storage fees. This increase in demand for the cotton would raise the price of cotton possibly allowing farmers to realize a profit on their crops, putting

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<sup>176</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 11, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>177</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 11, 13, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

cash money in their pockets for the first time. There is no evidence within the collection showing any sheep being purchased or brought to the area, leaving this story incomplete. While their ultimate goal is mere speculation, it is the most logical assumption. After spending many hours analyzing Hill's papers one learns that he seems to see things far in advance.

Hill seems to have the knack for seeing the bigger picture; just as looking at other documents can help to see the bigger picture of his vision of the future Sharon. The Hill Store Collection contains other letters Hill sent to companies of other industries trying to entice them into building manufacturing plants in the Sharon, South Carolina area. The first of these letters, dated 7 June 1929 and addressed to the Independent Trust Company in Charlotte, North Carolina, asked for information, "relative to Mr. J. C. Penny's milk and cheese business."<sup>178</sup> The letter shows Hill's dedication to serving Sharon as he proceeded to request information on having Mr. Penny locate one of his plants in the Sharon community where "our immediate community can furnish about one thousand gallon of milk daily."<sup>179</sup> On the 13<sup>th</sup> of June 1929, Hill wrote to Foremost Dairy Products, Inc., located in Jacksonville, Florida.<sup>180</sup> The point of the conversation is the same as that presented to Mr. Penny, stating that "we are very much interested in your good firm establishing a milk condenser or cheese plant."<sup>181</sup> In this particular letter Hill still claimed and reported that the local community could provide Foremost Dairy one thousand gallons a day and that this quantity could easily be increased as long as the dairy was

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<sup>178</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 13, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

willing to pay a fair price. The last letter, directed to a Mr. L. L. Hunt, Production Dept., Pet Milk Company, Greenville, Illinois on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August, appears to be in response to a failed business venture. Apparently, Pet Milk Company had originally intended to locate a plant in Rock Hill, South Carolina, but backed out of the deal because the estimated local consumption of milk would be too great, placing the dairy in a bind.<sup>182</sup> In his letter, Hill explains the benefits of a small community and their needs as compared to Rock Hill, as well as how the small town ambiance may be just what Pet Milk was looking for. After reviewing these documents in their totality, the bigger picture finally comes into view.

Hill appears to be attempting to increase the economic potential of Sharon and the surrounding area by enticing a variety of industries to locate in the Sharon area. The ingenuity of his plan suggests that he was much smarter than his meager education implies. By choosing these particular breeds he could not just expand the textile industry but also bring dairy based businesses to the community as well. In the end, Hill would capitalize on this expanded textile industry by the increased customer traffic in his mercantile. Hill would be providing the additional supplies the farmers would need in order to care for the newly established sheep herds and the potentially increased income from those farmers that already had dairy cows and would most likely want to increase those herds as well.

There are additional documents concerning this forward thinking of Hill as he looked for ways to ensure his and his community's economic viability. In most situations,

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

there have been multiple documents confirming Hill and his actions; however, this is not always the case. There is a single letter dated 25 April 1929 to a Mr. H. G. Smith of Burgess, South Carolina that references the purchase of Toggenburg Billy goats, a type of goat predominantly known for the amount of milk it can produce in a single day.<sup>183</sup>

Another single document directly related to both the sheep and goat issue pertains to what can only be called a post-producing need. All farm animals have a useable shelf life; chickens will eventually stop laying eggs, cows will eventually go dry, and then the farmer must decide what to do with his livestock that are no longer able to produce. Apparently, Hill had foreseen, as well as planned for, this eventuality in his pursuit. The answer is spelled out in a letter dated 9 August 1929 directed to a Mr. W. P. McKnight in care of the Sanitary Market located in Rock Hill, South Carolina. In this letter Hill estimated that the sheep would bring around ten cents per pound while the cattle should bring around eight cents a pound.<sup>184</sup>

The documents from 1929 that show Hill's attempts to increase the net worth of himself and his community have been cited because they are the most prevalent in the Hill Store Collection. There are other documents that suggest this behavior was not a one-time effort but part of a life-long pursuit. There are indications of his struggles with launching new enterprises, as described in a 1937 letter to the American Oil Company, Baltimore, Maryland. Hill apologized for having a delinquent balance of \$136.87 and indicated he was having some unseen difficulties in establishing his retail outlets. He also

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<sup>183</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 11, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>184</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 13, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

made a request for a tanker car of gasoline which needed to contain 8000 gallons of regular gasoline. The last line of this letter is most surprising in that it is not indicative of the language generally used by Hill when dealing with his vendors: “if for any reason you cannot ship promptly please advise so that we can make other arrangements.”<sup>185</sup> One final document showing this life-long pursuit was written by Hill on 6 March 1940, to a local Sharon resident, Mr. Roy Latham.<sup>186</sup> He inquired about a “Negro named Tom Anderson”<sup>187</sup> who was rather adept at turkey wrangling and Hill wanted to offer him a job, if he did not already have one. Hill asked Roy if this fellow was currently employed could he recommend someone else, who had experience with turkeys. According to the letter, Hill was going to purchase approximately two thousand turkeys and needed to hire someone who knew how to raise them. It is possible that Hill was involved in many other pursuits aimed at increasing the economic worth of Sharon; however, only the turkey farming seems to have prevailed. The turkey and chicken farms currently dotting the York and Chester County countryside could very well be the remnants, or descendants, of the Hill master plan.

It should be obvious that Hill was more than just a merchant and documents from the twenties and thirties offer details that can be used in defining the finished portrait of William Lawrence Hill, Sr. The same details can be gleaned from a 1923 article about him that appeared in a special edition of the Evening Herald honoring prominent citizens

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<sup>185</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 12, Folder 5, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>186</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 13, Folder 2, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

and their accomplishments.<sup>188</sup> Using descriptive details from the article, *Leading Citizen of Sharon Has Been Factor in Development of Western Portion of County*, an image of the man Hill was can be formed.

Remembering that he [Hill] was also a farmer we find snippets to this affect: “believes in improved methods of farming and developing a more fertile soil” “wide spread crop diversification”<sup>189</sup> as well as, “strong advocate of co-operative marketing.”<sup>190</sup> The Hill Store Collection contains documents that suggest Hill was not an absent landlord whose only interest was profits. There are two letters that indicate he was busy not just helping the local farmers in any way he could but also was involved in the education of the next generation of farmers. In May 1925, Hill wrote to a Mr. L. W. Johnson, the county agricultural agent in Rock Hill, acknowledging that he [Hill] had been selected as the leader of the Sharon Boy’s Club for the year 1925 and promised to do the very best job he could do.<sup>191</sup> Then, in December 1925, Hill sent a congratulatory letter to Mr. Harris Blair of Sharon, one of his Boy’s Club participants and a winner as well.<sup>192</sup> The letter suggests that the contest was for each boy to plant and harvest one acre of cotton, without adult support. Master Blair, as he should be addressed, seems to have made one hundred dollars profit on his acre of land; however, Hill went a step further suggesting that if this child chose to pursue a farming career he might want to come and talk to Hill, who would be happy to set him up. It may be that because Hill was, himself,

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<sup>188</sup> Bryan, “Leading Citizen of Sharon Has Been Factor In Development of Western Portion of County.”

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 13, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

a poorly educated man who now had five children, that he saw an obvious necessity in the community for formal education.

Two of the best descriptors used in the newspaper article when talking about Hill are, “self-made” and “ever alert to opportunities.”<sup>193</sup> Although the newspaper article told the readers that Hill donated the land for the new four-year high school, the first in the state, it is a document from July 1925 which shows that donating land was not the end of his involvement in the local school system. The letter is addressed to a Professor J. W. Shealy of Leesville, South Carolina.<sup>194</sup> The underlying theme of this letter is that the new high school needs a curtain for the stage and that on behalf of Mrs. J. A. Shannon, the drama teacher; there should be a public fundraiser in which the necessary funds can be raised. The details of the fund raiser are outlined in the letter; however, it is the last paragraph in this letter that shows the human side of Hill. In just five short sentences we strike gold. Hill ended this letter explaining a fishing trip he was considering taking. According to this letter, the trip was being sponsored by, “the Deloach people in Columbia” and would depart on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July. The trip, a week-long excursion down the east coast to Miami, included travel expenses to Miami and back as well as hotel expenses, “and all,” as Hill described this trip. All in all, this trip would cost the grand total of \$49.50, apparently a very good deal by the way Hill closed out the paragraph

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<sup>193</sup> Bryan, “Leading Citizen of Sharon Has Been Factor In Development of Western Portion of County.”

<sup>194</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 13, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.



noting, “pretty cheap, I think.”<sup>195</sup> This section of the letter shows that Hill, like most people, did have the need to get away from it all.

Schools and education issues are not the only examples of Hill’s civic-minded attitude and as the Hill Store Collection is evaluated as a whole, a better picture of who he was begins to come into focus. This collection is incomplete, but in spite of this there are sufficient documents spread out over decades in which certain personal traits can be established. Perhaps it is because of gaps and the long period of time the documents cover that made the supposed personal traits assigned to Hill more credible. The first document is dated 5 January 1929 and is addressed to the Honorable W. F. Stevenson, Member of Congress, in Washington D. C. This missive requested House Document No. 328 which concerned the creation of Kings Mountain National Park. The sentiment Hill portrayed in this instance was, “to have a real park made at this deserving spot.”<sup>196</sup> While no record of a contribution towards the park’s creation by Hill has been found, his statement suggests he believed in honoring the sacrifices of those who came before him.

Three documents, all dated April 1929, appear to be related and show that Hill believed in law and order and that it is each and every citizen’s civic duty to see that justice is carried out. Hill does not appear to ever have had any political ambitions-- he never held a political office, beyond that first year as founding father on the Sharon town council; however, he did serve on many juries and served as foreman on the York County, South Carolina grand jury in 1897. The first document on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April is addressed to a Mr. Harry D. Hines of Lancaster, South Carolina. In this missive Hill

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 13, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

informed Mr. Hines that he [Hill] had recommended Hines to the governor for the position of York County Solicitor.<sup>197</sup> The very next letter, dated the same day, was to the governor, the Honorable John G. Richards in Columbia, South Carolina. In this missive Hill informed the governor that Mr. Hines was a very good candidate for the job and hoped that the governor would look favorably on Mr. Hines' appointment.<sup>198</sup> It appears from the last document, ten days later, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, that there was urgency for the appointment of a new solicitor, which may explain Hill's involvement. Apparently, the old solicitor was recently appointed to the federal bench in the midst of the Rafe F. King murder trial and Hill wrote in a letter to an undisclosed gentleman that, because "our solicitor got bumped up to the federal bench we need not just a new solicitor but extra lawyers in order to get the new solicitor up to speed as quickly as possible."<sup>199</sup> This is just one example of Hill's civic engagement.

While doing the research, a mercantile document surfaced dated 6 September 1933 in which Hill bought syrup buckets.<sup>200</sup> One's first inclination might be that he was wholesaling syrup, but since no mercantile documents of such a nature were found other possibilities must be considered. The next thought might be that Hill was manufacturing the syrup in order to sell it at the mercantile; however, the documents just do not support such a conclusion. Finally, in a long drawn out process of elimination the default theory became moonshining. The thought process that led to this assumption is simple; all

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 13, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>200</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 11, Folder 2, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

farmers grow corn, the mercantile processed very little corn, and finally what do farmers do with excess corn? It's a primitive thought process but what better way to dispose of the excess corn and turn a profit? In addition to this, the very popular sport of Nascar racing can trace its' beginnings to depression era moonshiners and, with Lowe's Motor Speedway just up the road, moonshining became a natural hypothesis. The document in question is addressed to the Continental Can Company out of Baltimore, Maryland and asked for a quote on, "#10 and #5"<sup>201</sup> syrup buckets, "at once delivery delivered Sharon S C in car lots."<sup>202</sup> There must have been some haste to the inquiry hence the "at once delivery" clause contained in the letter. Could it be that Hill was himself a moonshiner? Knowing, or rather strongly believing, that Hill would never tarnish his good name or reputation by being involved in any sort of criminal activity, as another document dated 28 November 1940 to the Honorable Burnet R. Maybank, Governor Columbia, South Carolina shows that Hill cooperated with local authorities eradicating moonshiners. Hill wrote this letter on behalf of a local Sharon resident, a man by the name of J. S. Miller, who was also a State Constable. It seems that Mr. Miller had been actively working with Hill and other officers, "raiding stills;"<sup>203</sup> however, the letter was mostly about a part-time job for Mr. Miller. It appears that the original and only use for the friction top syrup bottles was the manufacture of sorghum molasses, a product that had been manufactured since colonial days. There is one final observation about Hill that can be gleaned from the collection. Just an observation at this point, for a man that never had any political

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 13, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

ambitions or receives any political appointments, Hill seems to have some sway over those that are in office.

It mattered little to Hill to whom he was writing. In all of these letters it may appear that he was making a simple request and thanking the recipient for any considerations that may be coming his way. Whether Hill was writing to the President of Duke Energy, the Governor, or even when trying to entice various industries into the area, there was this underlying feeling of intent that was: let us not do this simply because we can but because we, as prominent men and community leaders, should do it. Nevertheless, along with the evidence being presented one should be able to come up with a reasonable likeness of who Hill really was. What was his personality and disposition really like? In the case of Hill there is a very big other side of the story, a side in which a possible family secret is revealed.

To completely understand the other personality traits that Hill is exhibited, one must first look at his heritage. Anyone or rather everyone should agree that both heritage and environment imprint upon us as children at an early age. When the word heritage is used it is in reference to the culture in which one was raised. Let us say for example one's ethnicity is Irish, Italian, or Latin, then that makes one more than likely shaped by a Roman Catholic ideology. Along with religious indoctrination there are individual and different rites of passage, such as Holy Communion or Ba Mitzvah. In addition, there are things like foods and music, not to mention dance, in which all identify with distinctive cultures. Hill was no exception and his indoctrination began with his parents. Remember, both sides of his family, the Hill's and the Minters were more than likely slave owners

themselves and if they were not, they were raised and lived their whole lives within a slave-driven society and economy. Even though this country had just ended a very bloody civil war, one in which Hill's father of record made the ultimate sacrifice, the outcome of that war did little to change the mindset of the Southern Planter.

There is documentation both within the collection and in other primary documents that support the statement that Hill was a racist by today's definition or at the very least in association with white supremacy. In his obituary it is revealed that, "since the age of 11 Hill marched with the Red Shirts."<sup>204</sup> For those who are curious, the Red Shirts were a Ku Klux Klan type white supremacist organization as noted by Jerry West in his book, *The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan in York County, South Carolina, 1865-1877*. In essence West argues that black men realized that by collectively using their right to vote they could in certain circumstances ensure that a Black would be elected to office. West also notes that groups such as the Red Shirts ensured that these Black politicians never ran for a second term and in some cases never finished their first term. There are no documents in the Hill Store Collection that suggests Hill ever discriminated against anyone for any reason, including skin pigmentation; however, there are documents that expose his attitude on the issue.

The first document, dated 31 January 1923, addressed to the U. S. Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C., speaks rather loudly as to the mindset of Hill. The very first line of this letter lays out exactly what he wanted: "We are interested in securing a colony of fifty or a hundred families of Dutch or [Sweeds] or some other industrious and

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<sup>204</sup> "W. L. Hill, 87, Sharon Farmer, Merchant, Dies," *Evening Herald*, October 7, 1953, York County Library.

thrifty people.”<sup>205</sup> The next part of the letter explains the benefits these immigrants could expect: “we can raise very successfully, corn, oats, clover and grasses, and also potatoes and various feedstuff.”<sup>206</sup> Perhaps because Hill was an ardent promoter of the “big picture,” he also informed the potential workers with the gloomier side of the situation and its fallout: “we have heretofore been depending largely on cotton...advent of the boll weevil...our negro labor has been leaving us in large numbers.”<sup>207</sup> Hill then felt compelled to let them know that no effort was being made to keep the Black labor force from leaving York County. It appears that Hill’s attitude was much the same as the pre-Civil War attitude of the larger planters: “we consider most of them incompetent to produce cotton under boll weevil conditions...has never been successful with grains and other crops...no talent for breeding and raising livestock.”<sup>208</sup> This inquiry letter alone could establish his attitude, but there are other lesser inferences that give credence to his still clinging to the Old South views.

Planters Bank documents contain references to plantations, as does a letter Hill wrote to Reverend W. W. Arrowood dated 9 March 1925.<sup>209</sup> Hill is discussed the arrangements between Rev. Arrowood and Mr. Lowery McClure, who was sharecropping Rev. Arrowood’s land, and refers to parcels of land, “to make a crop on your plantation this year.”<sup>210</sup> An article from the *York Enquirer* gives a somewhat different reasoning, with Hill, portrayed as Sharon’s benefactor, “believing that, he is not reviewing with

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<sup>205</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 13, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 7, Folder 2, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

alarm the migration of Negroes to the north, but believes that their going will result in the use of improved machinery and farming techniques.”<sup>211</sup> Possibly Hill felt that those who were leaving did not have what it took to be successful, envisioning large mechanized agro-farms that could be successfully operated by a few good farmers. The Title benefactor seems to appropriately describe him, not only regarding the town of Sharon, but also regarding his own tenant farmers or possibly sharecroppers. In a letter from July 1925, Hill wrote to a Mr. John Q. Smith in Smyrna, South Carolina, after dropping by his farm to check the progress Mr. Smith had made planting this year’s crop. Finding no one on the farm, Hill told Mr. Smith, “your cotton needs work very badly.”<sup>212</sup> And like a benevolent parent scolding a head strong child, Hill proceeded to tell Mr. Smith exactly what needed to be done, step by step, and if these steps were followed, Mr. Smith would be able to harvest a cotton crop- “just as good as the fellows across the road.”<sup>213</sup> In reviewing many letters that Hill wrote to various people and entities on behalf of the residents and town of Sharon, South Carolina, the normal processes of growing a town were just not what one would expect. Usually when a community need arises, there are meetings, discussions, and possibly a vote before any action is taken. This does not appear to be how things went in the Sharon community.

The documents suggest that it was Hill that made many of the decisions regarding the needs of Sharon, and the townspeople accepted this. It is almost as though the citizens voluntarily allowed him to decide what was in their best interests because he was a

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<sup>211</sup> Bryan, “Leading Citizen of Sharon Has Been Factor In Development of Western Portion of County.”

<sup>212</sup> Hill Store Collection, Accession 1999.020, Box 80, Folder 13, Historical Center of York County, McCelvey Center, York, South Carolina.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

successful businessman who appeared to have political connections and could get things done. Can the actions of the residents of Sharon be compared to the many antebellum farmers who had few, if any, slaves on their small farms and yet allowed the larger plantation owners to basically control the state and federal governments via the three fifths clause? Maybe both groups, the antebellum small farmer and the residents of Sharon acquiesce to those they felt were better equipped or possibly better educated in dealing with such complex matters.

Hill was a man, not unlike every other man that came before him or after him. Most days he spent working to provide everything his family and community needed. At times, circumstances or situations brought out what can only be described as racist tendencies, but for the most part Hill was looked upon and acted like a responsible community elder and leader. The deciding factor in determining who he really was is not found explicitly in the Hill Store Collection but is implicitly demonstrated throughout the documents. The source of who Hill was can be found in a newspaper article and confirmed by former employee, Hershel Brown. When asked about any racial disparity within the Sharon community, Hershel's answer was not what anyone would ever have expected; and although taken out of context his answer sums up Hill's life better than anything else: "we were all in the same boat, nobody knew what it meant to be rich any more than we knew what it was like to be poor. If you needed shoes you got shoes and that is just how it was back then."<sup>214</sup> For Hill, life had no meaning if it was not lived in the service of others.

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<sup>214</sup> Herschel Brown, Sr. (former Hill & Co. employee), interviewed by Paul Laffredo III, Sharon, South Carolina, 22 April 2017.



## **The Legacy**

So, what does the War Finance Department have to do with southern cotton farming in general, especially in Sharon during 1918? The research shows that the War Finance Act was established to provide, in the initial stages, the funds for manufactures of vital war materials to increase their production capabilities, in order to not only meet the needs of the war effort but also to meet the needs of the general public at the same time. In the initial stages of this act farmers and their products were excluded from receiving the low interest loans; however, in 1922 the Act was expanded to include farmers. In theory the War Finance Act was a grand idea in providing farmers low interest loans to expand their farms, thereby increasing the amount of their harvests. The why's of cotton and how cotton fit into the war effort are two-fold: first there is the obvious need for more bandages and uniforms but there is also a use for cotton in the manufacturing of both explosives and cannon shells. Basically, gun cotton is a generic name for a cellulose based explosive called nitrocellulose, nitroglycerin soaked cotton.

At first glance, the War Finance Act seemed like a very good way of providing for the war effort but the reality of the situation is much bleaker. After gaining cheap money to expand their farms and while on the verge of realizing the largest cotton profits of the century the cotton market collapsed in 1920. With the collapse of an already flooded cotton market, the boll weevil soon took its toll on cotton depressing it even further. With local cotton markets suspended because of the flooded market, cotton prices dropped even more, driving farmers deeper into debt. In essence, the War Finance Department caused farmers to go deeper into debt, a debt they could ill afford in a

depressed market. In the end some farmers, but not all the farmers, who participated in this program lost their farms and either became sharecroppers or tenant farmers. Another option for these displaced farmers was moving away and gaining employment in one of the many local cotton mills. As the President of Planters Bank, Hill would ultimately benefit from farm foreclosures. Through Planters Bank, Hill accumulated around 1400 acres of good farm land he would otherwise most likely never have had owned. The act of acquiring this property appears to be rather sketchy and may be the root of another Hill family mystery which shall be explained. So this brings us to the other question we sought an answer for: what is the South's love of cotton?

Answering the question that deals with the South's love of cotton was not as easy as finding an answer to the War Finance Department question. The answer involved inadequate infra-structure that included both the railroads and later roads, or the lack of roads. As Ingram points out, the railroads were designed for transporting goods and raw materials for industry and not agricultural products. Later, with the advent of the Good Roads Movement and Henry Ford's automobile, farmers were better able to reach more than just local consumers. The time and distance to other markets as well as the farm commodity being shipped, greatly affects its useable storage life. Since most farm commodities have a limited shelf life, the potential monetary loss to spoilage became a real issue for the farmer. Cotton has no shelf life. A bale of cotton placed in storage today will still be a viable product one hundred years from now. Thus, because of the lack of an adequately maintained system of roads there was no other farm product that could be grown and brought to market both efficiently and economically.

At this point we have answered the questions that generated this research and additionally explored where Hill and his amazing life fit into the current historiography. There is the added bonus of discovering that the currently accepted history of the United States, especially the South, may not be exactly as the history books lead us to believe. This becomes evident as documents spanning from the early 1910's, through the roaring twenties and the Great Depression, finally culminating with Hill's death in 1953 were examined.

Although the story of William Lawrence Hill came to an end on 6 October 1953 the story of Sharon and the legacy of Hill did not. It would be a grave injustice to both Hill and Sharon to just stop this story at the moment of his death. Hill left behind five children, the first Mary V. Hill was born in 1910 and tragically lived only one year. Next in line was William Lawrence Hill Jr. who was born in 1911 and died from a heart attack in 1961. William, "Bill Jr." as he preferred to be called, married Margaret Smith and this union produced two girls, Mary Ann and Margaret. Both Mary Ann and Margaret married, each having two children. Margaret had two sons, William and Eric, while Margaret's children were daughters named Dana and Andrea, all except Mary Ann, who died in 2017, are presumed to still be living. Hill's next child was a girl, Jean McMurry Hill, who was born in 1913. Jean taught school in York and Rock Hill for most of her life; however, she never married and passed on in 2007. James Jerome Hill was his second son and was born in 1916, as well as the only one of Hill's children to serve in World War II. The Hill Store Collection shows that he worked many years at Hill & Co., eventually taking control of everything at the deaths of his father and brother "Bill Jr."

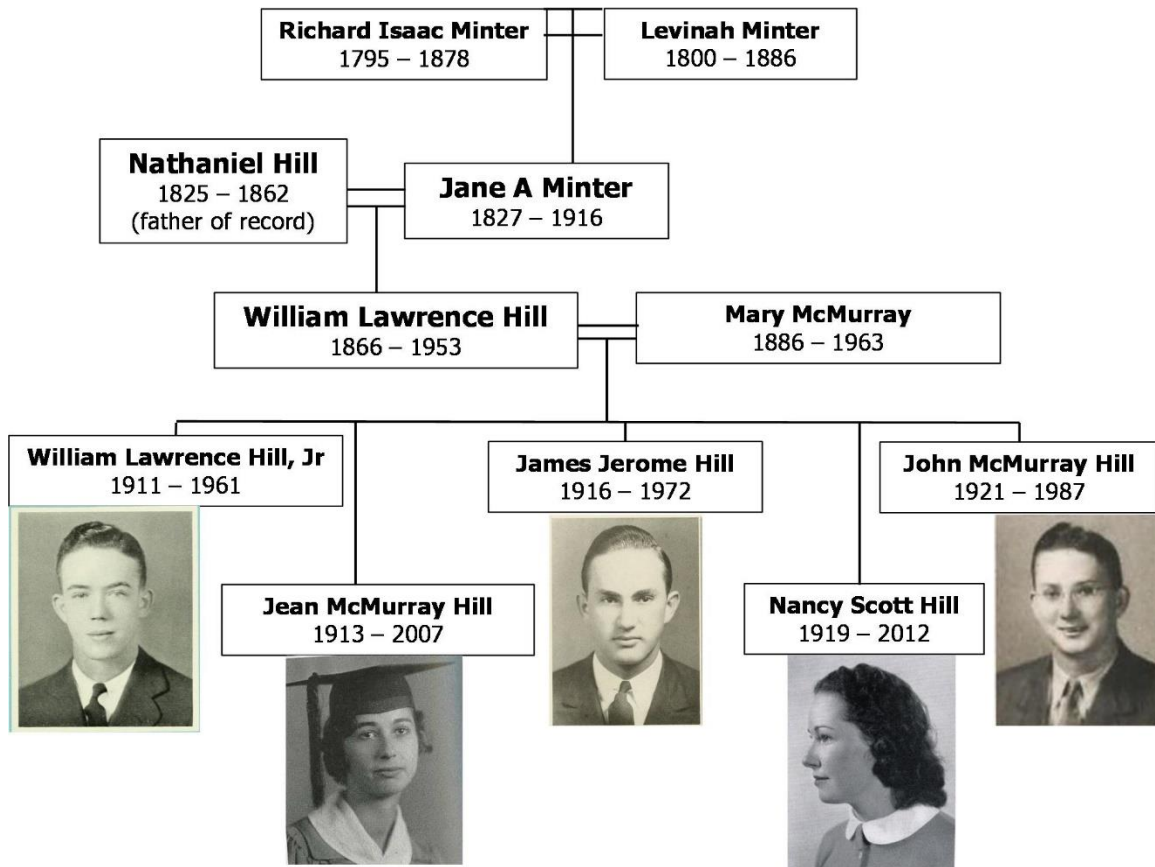
James never married and, sadly, met a tragic death at the hands of his younger brother in 1972. James, like his older sister Jean, never married or had any children. After James came Hill's second daughter, Nancy Scott Hill, born in 1919. Nancy married, producing one son, Andrew. Nancy died in 2012 and it is presumed Andrew is still living. The last of his children was John McMurry Hill. Records show John was born in 1921 and may have had a disability that prevented him from leading a full life. The 1940 census lists him at 19 years old as unable to work;<sup>215</sup> this is further supported by the fact that, although prime draft age during World War II, John never served. He did attend Presbyterian College, then worked and retired from Rock Hill Printing & Finishing Company.<sup>216</sup> On December 8, 1972 John fatally shot his brother, James, in the Hill & Co. mercantile.<sup>217</sup> There is nothing that explains John's actions; however, he must have deeply regretted it, because John took his own life on October 2, 1987, it was James' birthday. Although ones offspring are ones legacy they are not the only way to leave a legacy.

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<sup>215</sup> "United States Census, 1940," enumeration district ED 46-10, sheet 5A, line 21, family 94, Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940, NARA digital publication T627. Records of the Bureau of the Census, 1790 - 2007, RG 29, (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2012), roll 3845. FamilySearch, Accessed 15 March 2018, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:K46L-VKM>.

<sup>216</sup> Obituary of John Hill, *Evening Herald*, 4 October 1987, York County Library Rock Hill, South Carolina.

<sup>217</sup> The State of South Carolina vs John M. Hill. York County, South Carolina Court of General Sessions (1972).



*William Lawrence Hill, Sr family tree*

In his own words, Hill, on more than one occasion stated that, “my lack of formal education is my biggest weakness,” although this is a paraphrased quote, it was his true sentiment. Part of his legacy was that, in one generation he managed to college educate his children. As expected, Bill Jr., had a degree in Business Management from Davidson College, as did James. This should come as no surprise since it was normal for a father to groom his oldest son in hope that the son would continue what the father had started. Both of his daughters, Jean and Nancy, graduated from Winthrop, which at that time was called Winthrop Training School and was for girls only. Both Nancy and Jean received their degrees in Education; however, it appears that only Jean pursued teaching as a

profession. Nancy, as far as can be seen, left this area soon after graduating and never looked back. There are no records that show Nancy ever returning to the Sharon area for anything other than a funeral and the reason may be the last unsolved riddle left behind by Hill.

Upon the death of Nancy in 2012, the grandchildren of Hill, at the bequest of Nancy, returned to the descendants of the McGill family a piece of property. The property that was returned was a 434 acre farm. Hill foreclosed on this very same piece of property back in the twenties when Planters Bank was still conducting business. The property that was formerly known as the McGill place at the time the property was transferred was worth around eight to nine hundred thousand dollars. The property card from the York County Property records even reflects that number as being the sale price.<sup>218</sup> However, more revealing are the tax records which show the transfer of this parcel for one dollar.<sup>219</sup> One can only imagine the level of forgiveness such a gift might foster.

Where Hill's life fits into the accepted historiography can be developed through an examination of the primary sources, sources that are generally considered reliable. Going back to the beginning of this investigation it was determined that there were two main camps or schools of thought concerning who was running the New South after Reconstruction. The C. Vann Woodward camp followers argued that a new breed of

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<sup>218</sup> Property card, map number 2010000004, York County, South Carolina Geographic Information Services, 22 May 2012, [https://evolvepublic.yorkcountygov.com/tempview/10022018174011\\_4196-5.pdf](https://evolvepublic.yorkcountygov.com/tempview/10022018174011_4196-5.pdf).

<sup>219</sup> Property report map number 2010000004, York County, South Carolina Geographic Information Services, accessed 8 May 2018, [https://maps2.yorkcountygov.com/ez/Report\\_Property.aspx?type=owner&key=2010000004](https://maps2.yorkcountygov.com/ez/Report_Property.aspx?type=owner&key=2010000004).

merchant/entrepreneur took the lead while Tindall and his followers think that the same people who were in charge before Reconstruction reestablished leadership after Reconstruction. In the matter of William Lawrence Hill it appears that he was a tight rope walker striding right down the middle between the two camps. Like a tight rope walker trying to maintain his balance at times he leaned towards the Woodward side and at other times he swung towards the Tindall side. Hill was a man who through necessity had to maintain one foot in each camp thus straddling the fence between the two. At times he resorted or appeared to resort to racist thought or actions and at other times he appears to be a benevolent city patriarch. Simply, Hill was a man of service, doing or being whatever was needed to serve his God, his family, and his community. The historiography suggests that there may be a third camp, one which neither Woodward or Tindall considered; however, before that claim can even be made, more collections of this caliber would need to be found and evaluated.



## Appendix A: First page of 1921 State Bank Examiner's Report

STATE BANK EXAMINER South Carolina		No. of Bank	
<b>EXAMINER'S REPORT</b>			
Condition of "The <b>Planters Bank</b>		No. of Bank	
Located at <b>Sharon</b> S. C., in the County of <b>York</b>			
At the close of business <b>August 8, 1921.</b>			
Examination commenced at <b>10:40</b> o'clock A. M., on <b>August 8, 1921</b>		<b>192</b>	
Examination closed at <b>5:10</b> o'clock P. M., on <b>" 9 "</b>		<b>192</b>	
, President <b>W. L. Hill</b>		, Cashier <b>James D. Hambright</b>	
RESOURCES	AMOUNT	LIABILITIES	AMOUNT
1. Loans and Discounts	271,578.90	1. Capital Stock Paid In	35,000.00
2. Overdrafts	321.21	2. Surplus Fund	4,000.00
3. Bonds and Stocks	2,125.00	3. Other Undivided Profits, viz.:	
4. Banking House \$		Discounts	10,238.39
Furniture and Fixtures		Exchange	138.94
5. Other Real Estate Owned		Interest	832.70
6. Cash Items \$	1,195.60	Rents	11,210.03
Currency	538.00	Profit and Loss	
Gold Coin	365.00	4. Dividends Unpaid	260.00
Silver Coin	457.02	5. Individual Deposits, viz.:	
7. Checks on Other Banks	2,555.62	Subject to Check \$	86,651.43
in same town		Saving Deposits	550.41
8. Exchanges for Clearing House		Demand Certifs.	
9. Current Expenses \$	2,456.82	Time Certificates	61,839.36
Taxes Paid	100.38	Certified Checks	
Interest Paid	1,358.33	Cashier's Checks	881.37
Loss sale 1/3	3,915.53	6. Notes and Bills Rediscounted	149,922.57
10. Due from Banks and Bankers		7. Bills Payable, Including Certificates for Money Borrowed	40,327.50
<b>Murchison Nat. Bank,</b>	9.86	8. Reserve Fund	25,000.00
<b>Wilmington, N.C.</b>		9. Due to Banks and Bankers	2,000.00
<b>First National Bank,</b>	24.59	<b>Collections</b>	2,780.26
<b>Richmond, Va.</b>		<b>Liberty Bonds (Custom-</b>	11,300.00
<b>Hanover Nat. Bank, N.Y.</b>	461.73	<b>ers)</b>	
<b>American Trust Co.</b>	54.51	<b>National Union Bank,</b>	1,021.22
<b>Charlotte, N.C.</b>		<b>Rock Hill, S.C.</b>	
<b>First Nat. Bank,</b>	1,275.03	<b>Cash over</b>	40
<b>Clover, S.C.</b>		<b>Broad River Township</b>	
<b>Road Bonds-Deposit</b>		<b>on bid by bank</b>	500.00
<b>10. Other Liabilities</b>		<b>TOTAL</b>	282,621.98
<b>TOTAL</b>	282,621.98	<b>11. Other Resources</b>	



## Appendix B: Second page of 1921 State Bank Examiner's Report

## LIABILITIES—Continued

## 7 and 8. Rediscount and Borrowed Money

[Where money is borrowed by rediscounts, on open account, or otherwise, state below where and when accommodation was procured, the form and amount of obligation, rate of interest paid, date of maturity, and whether secured by collaterals of the bank. State also whether bank borrows habitually, and whether such liabilities have been authorized by board of directors.]

B/R	14,981.50	Natl. Union Bank, Rock Hill, S.C.	10,000.00	Due Oct. 1	8%
"	15,929.35	Manover Nat. Bank, N.Y.	10,000.00	" Nov. 1,	6%
"	10,751.00	American Trust Co., Charlotte, NC	5,000.00	" Sept. 9,	7%
	<u>40,661.95</u>		<u>25,000.00</u>		

## Rediscounts:

National Union Bank, Rock Hill, S.C. Note J. E. McGill, Sons Co.	4,562.50	Nov. 1	8%
Manover Natl. Bank, N.Y. Note Hill & Co.	10,000.00	Oct 4	6%
First Natl. Bank, Clover, S.C., 32 Sundry Notes	25,775.00		8%
	<u>40,327.50</u>		

Bank has pledged as additional security to Rediscounts at National Union Bank, Rock Hill, \$4,627.50

## Recapitulation

[Wherever it appears that any loss has been sustained or probable on any item, or that value has depreciated, enter the book value of such item or items in schedule below, together with estimated probable loss thereon. If no loss is probable, indicate that fact by the word "none." In every report enter in this schedule the amount of surplus and profits on hand at date of examination.]

## IN ALL CASES WHERE LOSSES ARE ESTIMATED, FURNISH ITEMIZED LIST

RESOURCES	BOOK VALUE	PROBABLE LOSS	Estimated Value of Assets Not Shown on Books	SURPLUS, UNDIVIDED PROFITS, ETC.
"Bad Debts"	\$	\$	\$	Reserve fund \$ 2,000.00
Other overdue paper				Surplus fund 4,000.00
Other loans and discounts		2,071.00		Undivided profits 13,210.00
Overdrafts				TOTAL 17,210.03
Bonds, securities, claims, etc.				Less current expenses, taxes, etc. 3,915.53
Banking House				Total Surplus and Profits 13,294.50
Furniture and fixtures				
Other real estate				
Cash items	Bank carries on individual ledger under head of Fees, \$2,000.00 which is a reserve set aside to absorb loss that will be sustained on note of Robert McGill \$4,500.00. This was put on individual ledger Jan. 20, 1921.			
TOTAL ledger Jan. 20, 1921.				

## General Remarks as to Condition of Bank

[State briefly your opinion as to the general condition of the bank, and whether its business is prosperous or otherwise; whether officers are capable, prudent, and of good reputation; the management efficient and successful, or otherwise; and give summary of matters to which special attention should be called, using extra sheet if necessary.]

Bank has a good many loans which are insufficiently secured but Cashier believes these can be worked out without loss. Attention has been called to excess liabilities of some of the Directors and Cashier promises to have these matters arranged. President is in excess by reason of Hill and Company's obligations.

Clerical condition is excellent.

To the State Bank Examiner  
Columbia, S. C.

Examiner.

Appendix C: Planters Bank document dated 18 April 1940

**THE PLANTERS BANK**

CAPITAL \$ 35.000.00

SHARON, S. C.

April 18, 1940

G.D. Franke & Company

Charleston, S.C.

Gentlemen:

We herewith enclose check  
No. 3294 of Hill Motor Sales in the amount  
of \$ 128.17 in payment of note of Hill & Co.,  
Sharon, S.C.

Very truly yours,

PLANTERS BANK

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[google.com/books?id=vOs9AQAAMAAJ&lpg=PA22&dq=W.L.%20Hill%20sharon%20tile%20brick&pg=RA1PA79#v=onepage&q=W.L.%20Hill%20sharon%20tile%20brick&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=vOs9AQAAMAAJ&lpg=PA22&dq=W.L.%20Hill%20sharon%20tile%20brick&pg=RA1PA79#v=onepage&q=W.L.%20Hill%20sharon%20tile%20brick&f=false).

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